

ALFRED
HITCHCOCK's
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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DETECTIVE**

**A Puzzling
Whodunit**

**by B.K.
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In our July, 1987, issue, we mentioned the second annual private-eye-novel writing contest sponsored jointly by St. Martin's Press, the Private Eye Writers of America, and Macmillan, Ltd., in London.

Over four hundred entries were received, and the winner has just been announced: Gar Haywood for his novel titled *Fear of the Dark*. St. Martin's says it was chosen "for its unusual slant—it's about a black detective in Los Angeles—and its gritty street-wise style."

The novel will be published in August.

There were five other finalists in the contest, and St. Martin's is also considering publishing two of those manuscripts.

And now the third annual contest is under way. If you are a writer—or an aspiring writer—and you've never had a private eye novel published, this contest is a good one. (Mr. Haywood's prize, like his predecessor's, was a \$10,000 advance and guaranteed publication in this country and

in England.) But St. Martin's says "there will be some changes in the rules for the Best First Private Eye Novel contest in 1988." You can get a set of rules by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to:

Thomas Dunne
PWA/St. Martin's Press Contest
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10010.
(Manuscripts, however, should not be sent to that address; see the rules for where to send them.)

It's not too soon to begin thinking about attending Bouchercon XIX, to be held this year in San Diego. The annual convention of mystery readers and writers is scheduled for October 7, 8, and 9, and will take place at the Grant Hotel. Guest of Honor will be Charlotte MacLeod; Toastmaster will be Robert Barnard.

Attendance will be limited to eight hundred persons this year, so it might be a good idea to get your reservations in early. (Also, the Grant, which is offering special Bouchercon rates, has

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only two hundred fifty rooms, though, of course, there are other hotels in the vicinity.)

For a registration form or further information, write to:

Bouchercon XIX
% Grounds for Murder
Mystery Bookstore
2707 Congress Street
San Diego, California 92110.

Membership in the convention is \$30 through October 5, \$35 at the door (space permitting). There is an additional charge for attending the Saturday night banquet and a special tea on the Friday afternoon. Reservations at the Grant Hotel should be made

with the hotel; convention rates per night are \$89 for a single, \$93 for a double. Be sure, of course, to ask for the Bouchercon rate. The hotel's address:

U. S. Grant Hotel
326 Broadway
San Diego, California 92101.

Or call: 800-237-5029 (in California: 800-334-6957).

Finally, American Airlines is offering a five percent discount below the lowest bargain fare available from October 2-13. Information about that is included in the convention information you will get with the registration form.

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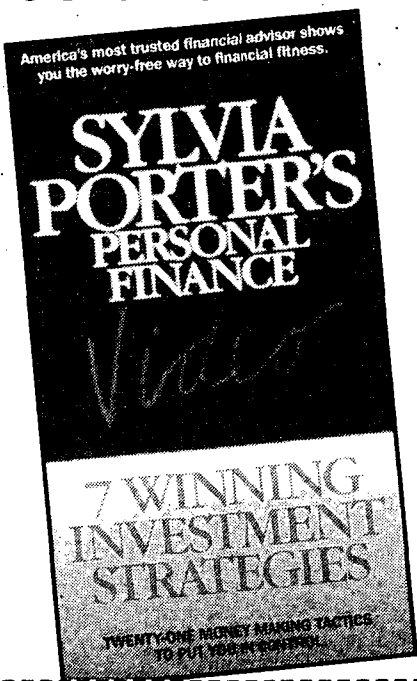
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AH

True Detective

by B. K. Stevens

Dear Mother,
It happened again. I don't know if I can stand it this time. The worst part is that Bolt, as always, has no idea of what really went on. He's so pitifully grateful—so

honored, he says, that he had another chance to see me at work. Everyone else around here, from the captain to the mailroom clerk, takes the same view of it. My conscience has been pulling at me so hard that

Illustration by Joe Jereda

I've got a cramp in the back of my neck, but I haven't found the courage to do what I know I ought to do—to make Bolt see the truth, to tell the captain, and to take the consequences.

Let me tell you the whole story. Maybe confessing to you will make me feel better about not confessing to Bolt. On Saturday morning, the captain got a call from the cops in Harrison Heights, a classy suburb half an hour outside the city limits. They'd had a homicide. It looked pretty straightforward: a man came home from a walk, surprised a burglar, and got clubbed to death as a result. Normally, the local cops would handle something like that themselves, but this time the victim was a very wealthy, influential man, Carl Cripner. Around here, he's known as the Condominium King. The local cops wanted to catch the burglar if they possibly could, and they sure didn't want anyone to say they hadn't been thorough.

"So they asked if I could lend them my sharpest detective as an adviser," the captain said. "That sounds like you, Walt." He smiled, then lowered his voice. "And take old Gordy along, why don't you? It'll do him good to get out of the station."

You see, that's how everyone thinks of him—good old Gordon

Bolt, the aging sergeant who will never be more than a sergeant, a plodding, pleasant guy who isn't much good for anything but taking statements from housewives who think the teenage boys next door have telescopes aimed at their bedroom windows. Everyone likes him: he's the sort who always remembers to ask how your kid's Little League game turned out, and no one could be more good-natured about serving as the butt of a practical joke. But he doesn't get sent out on cases much any more. Not that he's really that old—fifty-one or fifty-two, maybe. Still, he *does* move slowly these days, and his hair is getting thinner and his waist thicker, and a lot of us younger guys have been promoted over his head, and—well, you know the type.

You should have seen Bolt's face glow when I asked him to come with me. He insisted on driving—"it's the least I can do," he said, as though he wouldn't have anything else to contribute. Of course, that meant it took over an hour to get to Harrison Heights. Bolt never goes above forty, and we got lost twice: he chatters so much that he doesn't pay attention to where he's going, and he has trouble reading street signs. I've tried to talk him into getting new glasses, but he's afraid

the doctor would declare him legally blind and report him to the department. If the captain ever takes it into his head to make Bolt go down to the firing range and qualify again, it's all over.

Cripner's house doesn't look like a place somebody actually lives in: it looks like a hotel, maybe, or a country club, with genuine pillars, and a lawn big enough to keep a herd of cows happy, and this wide cobblestone drive winding up from the road and around to the back. A stout, stiff lady with a black dress and red eyes let us in and took us back to a football-field-sized room she called the den. That's where the body was.

The local cops had despaired of ever seeing us, so the body was already strapped to a stretcher, ready to be taken away. We could see the chalk outline and the bloodstains on the carpet, though, and the golf club lying nearby. And we could see the evidence of burglary: the lock on the french windows smashed, desk drawers open, papers and doodads scattered on the floor. There was something else, too. In the middle of the chalk outline lay a black and white photograph in a silver frame, showing a much younger Cripner standing with his arm around a pretty woman who was holding a baby. Awfully poignant stuff, I thought.

The officer in charge filled us in. "Decedent is Carl Cripner, widower, age sixty-three," he said. "The housekeeper found the body around seven this morning, when she came downstairs and noticed the door to the den still closed. The coroner's preliminary opinion is that decedent died of multiple blows to the back of the head. The murder weapon is apparently that golf club over there."

That much I could have figured out for myself. "Nothing so convenient as fingerprints on the club, I suppose," I said.

"No, sir. No prints at all, not even Cripner's. It's been wiped clean. Our best guess on time of death is around ten last night. That's based on the testimony of Eliot Stearn, Cripner's personal secretary. Cripner and Stearn had a short meeting in here last night, and when Stearn left at nine fifteen, Cripner said he was going to take a walk about the grounds, have a cigar, and then study some contracts before going to bed. An after-dinner stroll was a habit of his, and he usually spent about an hour at it. We found footprints on the grounds that seem to match his shoes, mud on the shoes, and a cigar butt in the swimming pool behind the house. But the contracts he planned to look at were still locked in his file cabinet. So probably the burglar broke in

while Cripner was on his walk, saw him heading back to the house, attacked him as soon as he got in, and took off."

"That's the way it looks," I agreed. "Any other footprints on the grounds? Any tire tracks you can't account for?"

"No, sir. But that's not really surprising. Between that long driveway and the stone patio behind the house, a burglar could come and go without leaving many traces. We're dusting the room for fingerprints, of course, but we're not hopeful. The burglar probably wore gloves."

"Any burglar with brains would," I agreed, not feeling very hopeful myself. "Now, the housekeeper sleeps in, right? Anyone else in the house when it happened? Anyone hear anything at all?"

He checked his notes. "The housekeeper thinks she heard a car around two, but she's not sure—and that's probably too late for the burglar, anyway. As to other people, Cripner's twenty-two-year-old daughter went out at eight, came back around nine thirty, and went straight up to bed. Didn't hear anything all night. And there were two houseguests who didn't hear anything either—Jack Lazell and his lawyer, Arthur Hare."

I perked up at the name Jack Lazell. Supposedly, he runs an

import business, but we've known for years that he's got underworld friends and pretty much controls a couple of labor unions and half a dozen politicians. He's never been convicted of anything—his sort seldom is—but his name's come up in connection with some very nasty stuff. But that was neither here nor there. "Didn't Cripner have a burglar alarm system?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. A Night-Tight Special. He usually turned it on himself, but not until he went to bed. So it didn't do him any good last night."

Nothing did him any good last night. The local cop went off to call his captain, leaving Bolt and me alone with the body. I walked over to the stretcher for a look. Cripner was short, a little overweight. I won't tell you what his head looked like: believe me, you wouldn't enjoy the description. I found myself noticing how expensive his clothes were, and the irony of it all hit me—Carl Cripner, millionaire, murdered by some two-bit burglar who didn't even know how to pick a lock.

"Look at that," I said, pointing to Cripner's wrist. "A platinum Rolex watch. You know how much those things cost?" I couldn't get past the combination of wealth and weakness, past the fascinating and some-

how heartening fact that a rich man's skull crushes as easily as mine would. "I can just see Cripner at dinner last night, in his fancy house, surrounded by his daughter, his servants, his powerful friends. Then, just a few hours later, he's dead. And the murderer simply disappears—doesn't leave so much as a smudge on the golf club." I pulled myself out of my reverie. We had a lot of work ahead of us: finding out what was stolen, pulling in locals with burglary records, tracking down fences. "Well," I said with a sigh, "at least it's pretty clear what happened."

"Very clear, the way *you* put it together, lieutenant," Bolt said, shaking his head with admiration. "Transparently clear. But I don't think anyone else could have seen through it all so quickly."

I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. But fortunately—or unfortunately—Bolt was too absorbed in his own enthusiasm to notice.

"I wish I had your talent for seizing on the most relevant evidence," he was saying. "The way you summed it all up just now! You're right: it can't have been a real burglary. What burglar would have left that watch behind? No matter how desperate he was to get away, he would have taken two seconds

to grab the watch. And a burglar would be wearing gloves—why would he wipe the golf club off? I get your point: the murderer must not have been wearing gloves when he killed Cripner, and therefore he must not be a burglar. And I see why you stressed the timing and the number of people in the house. Cripner couldn't have been killed much after ten, since he never took out the contracts. Why would a burglar break in while all the lights were still on and so many people were still up? Well, you've convinced me, sir. This was no burglary. It was murder, plain and simple, and the burglary was faked to cover it up."

I know what you're thinking, Mother. I should have congratulated Bolt right then and admitted I had missed those points completely. But that would have been humiliating. Besides, I was scrambling to find a flaw in his theory, and I thought I saw one, one that would explain at least the timing of the break-in. "The Night-Tight Special," I began.

"I see what you mean, sir," Bolt cut in, his head bobbing vigorously. "If Cripner had a decent security system, a burglar might have been nervous about breaking in after it was activated. But a Night-Tight Special! A fifth-rate piece of

junk—any third-rate burglar could disconnect it in two minutes. They should pull that thing off the market. It's just about fraud to advertise it as a security system—don't you agree, sir?"

(That's another reason I wanted to write to you, Mother. I'm sorry I recommended the Night-Tight Special. I honestly thought it looked like a pretty good burglar alarm, but I guess you'd better get rid of it.)

"So," Bolt said, bubbling with deference, "how can I help? You want me to call Cripner's lawyer for a copy of his will? And perhaps I could assemble the suspects for you. Let's see: the daughter, the secretary, the housekeeper, the two houseguests. Am I forgetting anyone?"

"No," I said, trying to adjust to it all. "That is, I don't think so. We'll find out about the will first, and then I'll talk to the housekeeper to get some background. Not here, though—find another room we can use."

"Of course, sir. May I sit in on the interrogations? I promise I'll keep my mouth shut. I just want to observe your technique."

"Sure," I said weakly. "Sit in, by all means." I wasn't all that confident about my technique any more: I had a sick feeling that Bolt's observations were

far more likely to lead us to the murderer.

I didn't much like the room Bolt picked out. They call it the East Parlor, and it's too cheerful for an interrogation room—big, sunshiny bay windows, a dark pink carpet, flimsy little bits of furniture here and there, and pale green wallpaper with squiggles on it. At least there was a desk, but it was a fragile thing with long, spindly legs, and polished so slick that my notebook scooted around whenever I tried to write. Bolt sat behind me to my left, half-perched on an antique chair, as if he was afraid it'd collapse if he put his full weight on it. We picked a straight-backed chair for the suspects and placed it directly in front of the desk.

I hate to watch big women sniffle. If a petite woman sniffls during an interrogation, I give her my handkerchief and practically croon my questions; if a big woman sniffls, I tap my pencil on the desk and bark at her. I know it's not fair, but I can't help it. Agnes Webster, Cripner's housekeeper, was five foot ten and about forty pounds overweight, and she sniffled the whole time we talked to her. It drove me nuts.

At least she gave us a reasonably coherent account of last

night's comings and goings. At five thirty, after a full day of meetings, Cripner had come home with his secretary—Eliot Stearn—and his two house-guests, Jack Lazell and Arthur Hare. Cripner's daughter, Madeline, joined them for dinner. Afterwards, she and Cripner went into the den to talk, and then she left at eight when a friend named Peter Marlowe came to take her to a party in the city. That's when Stearn, Lazell, and Hare joined Cripner for a meeting in the den. Around nine, Lazell and Hare went down to the billiards room; around nine fifteen, Stearn left to go home. It was only about ten minutes later that Madeline Cripner returned, talked to Agnes Webster briefly, and then went up to her room. Webster herself spent the evening in the family room, watching television. Three times Lazell and Hare called her on the house phone to ask for beers. The men went to bed shortly before midnight, and she followed after locking up. Two hours or so later, she awoke suddenly, thought she heard a car, sat up in bed for a few minutes, heard nothing more, and went back to sleep.

I looked over my notes. "So Mr. Cripner left his house-guests to themselves from nine o'clock on. That's a little

odd, isn't it? A little rude?"

She stopped sniffing long enough to give me a dirty look. "One doesn't become successful by socializing. Mr. Cripner always devoted his evenings to business. He took his stroll and then worked at his desk until one or two in the morning. His guests understood that. And I, of course, understood that I was never to disturb him after he retired to his den. The only one who ever so much as knocked at his door was Madeline."

"But she didn't do that last night. Just went straight up to her room without even saying goodnight to her father. Was that usual with her?"

Agnes Webster hesitated. "Well, no. But she was upset when she got home last night. The poor child had a headache, and she'd quarreled with Peter. She said she didn't feel like talking to anyone."

Except you, I thought. Webster and the daughter seemed pretty close. "How long have you been Cripner's housekeeper?" I asked.

"Exactly twenty-five years next April, ever since he married and moved into this house." She blew her nose sadly. "It was such a dreadful shock finding him this morning—his poor face all bloody, his poor eyes staring up at me so helplessly—"

I tapped my pencil so hard

that the desk rattled. "And what about the wife? Dead, right? How?"

She gave me another dirty look, probably because I hadn't phrased the question more delicately. "In a car accident, when Madeline was only three. I've been like a mother to the poor child since then."

I wondered if she had ever been like a wife to Cripner. Considering her bulk, it didn't seem likely; but who knows what she had looked like twenty-five years ago? And Cripner's will left her fifty thousand. "Did the Cripners have a happy marriage?" I asked.

I half-expected her to rebel at the irrelevance of the question, but she just pursed her lips. "I suppose so. Not at first, perhaps. Mrs. Cripner was very young when they married, and a little flighty, a little pampered, not interested in much but parties and shopping. But after a year or so she settled down. He was heartbroken when she died. As were we all."

I decided to try a random shot. "What about the daughter? A little flighty, like her mother? Did she give her father much trouble?"

This time, she did rebel. "Absolutely not. I suppose you've been gossiping with the day servants, and I suppose they brought up that old business

about the Stearn boy. Well, it was just a teenage infatuation. Mr. Cripner and Mr. Stearn took care of it promptly, and it's all been long forgotten. She was gone only three days, after all."

It was hard not to smirk at the way I had tricked her into giving me my first hint of an incident she undoubtedly didn't want me to know about. I was still congratulating myself on my cleverness when she left the room and Bolt tapped me timidly on the shoulder.

"Should I have the local cops see if they can bring Peter Marlowe over here?" he asked. "Or do you want to talk to him at his own home?"

I hadn't realized I wanted to talk to Peter Marlowe at all. Frankly, it took me a moment to remember who Peter Marlowe was. But Bolt was right. Marlowe had taken Madeline Cripner out last night, quarreled with her, and brought her home after a suspiciously short date. He might be able to tell us about her state of mind. Or he might be a suspect himself.

"I'll talk to him here," I said. "Eliot Stearn first, though. I want to hear more about what happened between his son and Cripner's daughter."

You can tell Stearn's English, just by looking at him. He's thin in that nervous, energetic way you see in a lot of

English actors, and he has the right sort of pinched features—sort of a blond David Niven, only taller. He had come to America twenty-seven years ago, he said, fresh out of Oxford, and had been Cripner's personal secretary ever since; but none of that had made any dent in his accent. When a person's lived in America that long, it's natural for him to start sounding like an American. Stearn must have worked at keeping his accent; that seems pretty phony to me, and pretty unfriendly. Anyway, I feel uncomfortable around guys who are secretaries.

"What sort of business did Cripner have with Lazell?" I asked.

Stearn shook his head and smiled regretfully. "It was confidential. It isn't my place to talk about it, really."

His tone let me know that it wasn't my place to ask about it, really. I snarled. "Then I'll ask Lazell. Maybe he isn't so picky about his place. What did you do for Cripner? Typing, filing, stuff like that?"

He smiled again, in a way that made me feel twelve years old. "Hardly. He had clerks for such chores. I supervised his correspondence, his appointments, and his staff; and I also selected his clothes, his wines, and the art and furnishings for

his home. Mr. Cripner hadn't the time for such matters, and he had the good sense to know he hadn't the taste for them, either. But he liked things done right." Stearn looked about complacently. "I did this room. Rather nice, don't you think?"

I decided it wasn't my place to say, really. "We understand there was some nasty business between your son and Cripner's daughter a few years back. Want to tell us about it?"

For the first time, Stearn looked uncomfortable. "It was seven years ago. My son was seventeen, Miss Cripner two years younger. A mild adolescent attachment developed. Mr. Cripner thought it unsuitable, so I sent my son to my old public school in England, and he's since decided to settle in London. As you can see, it was completely over long ago."

"So your boss made you send your only kid packing. Didn't that make you mad? Didn't it bother you that he didn't think your son was good enough for his daughter?"

Stearn blushed slightly. "Not at all. With regard to birth and breeding, my son is certainly Miss Cripner's equal—the equal of anyone in this country, if I may say so. But as far as wealth is concerned, the disparity was very great. I didn't resent Mr. Cripner's stand in the least. I

was the one who suggested sending my son to England, in fact."

Stearn must have been scared to death of his boss, I thought. "So last night you supposedly went straight home at nine fifteen. Did you stay there all night? Can you prove it?"

He relaxed again. "I can prove I went home, at any rate. I bought gas at a station near my house and used a credit card, so the proprietor must have a record of the transaction. As for the rest, I'm divorced and live alone, and I had no callers. My car was parked in front of my house all night, however. Perhaps my neighbors can confirm that. Perhaps not."

"Perhaps nobody watched your car every second," I said, losing patience. "That's no alibi. What would have stopped you from buying gas, turning right around, and coming back here to kill Cripner?"

"Nothing," he said pleasantly. "But I doubt I could have driven up to the house unnoticed. My tailpipe fell off two days ago, and I haven't had a chance to have it fixed: my car makes a good deal of noise. Besides, why would I want to kill Mr. Cripner?"

"Oh, I don't know. The hundred thousand he left you, maybe?"

Stearn raised an eyebrow

gracefully, enough to register grateful acknowledgment without suggesting greedy delight. "Very generous. But then, so is my salary. With Mr. Cripner dead, I'll have to seek a new position. I don't much fancy that after all these years."

I didn't much fancy Stearn, so I sent him on his way and tried to size him up. He didn't seem the violent type, but sometimes the quiet ones are dangerous: they hold their anger back for years, and then it suddenly explodes. I turned around to share this bit of wisdom with Bolt.

"He seems harmless," I said, "but he could be holding back—"

"—some facts about what happened seven years ago," Bolt agreed eagerly. "That struck me, too. Webster said Miss Cripner was gone for three days, but Stearn didn't mention that. You think he's protecting Miss Cripner, sir?"

Damn. I had forgotten about those three days. "Could be," I said curtly. "Well, let's see Lazell next."

Jack Lazell was more to my taste than Eliot Stearn—he's a scumbag, but the sort of scumbag I'm used to and know how to handle. Physically, he's the same type as Cripner was, short and stocky with coarse features. He's probably around forty-five. He wanted his law-

yer with him, he said, or he wouldn't talk to us at all. The lawyer, Arthur Hare, is a cautious, pinstriped type who didn't do much but confirm his client's answers to some of my questions and advise him not to answer the others. Between the two of them, I had a hard time learning about the business discussed yesterday, but eventually I figured out that it had to do with a new condominium project Cripner was planning. With all Lazell's pals in the construction unions and the city council, I could see why Cripner thought it worthwhile to play up to him.

"So he invited you both here for the weekend," I said. "You were going to spend the whole time in meetings?"

"Not the whole time," Lazell said easily. "We were going to play some golf, swim, that sort of thing. And tonight I'm taking Madeline to a dance at Cripner's country club."

"Or rather," the lawyer cut in, "you had planned to do so, until this melancholy event took place. You've since altered your plans, of course."

Lazell looked at him in disappointment. "Bad taste, huh?" he asked, and the lawyer nodded. "Then I guess I've altered my plans."

It was getting interesting. "You've taken a liking to Miss Cripner?"

"Yeah," Lazell said with enthusiasm. "Madeline's a great kid. A little cool, but real classy. I met her a month ago, at her father's office, and I've been itching for another crack at her ever since. She's the kind I could go for in a big way."

"So maybe," I said, warming up, "you got mad as hell when she went out with another man last night. Maybe you complained to Cripner. Maybe he said he didn't want his daughter mixed up with a cheap crook twice her age. And maybe you picked up a golf club and—"

"Nothing like that happened," Lazell said, his neck getting red. "Cripner was all for me and Madeline getting together. Last night wasn't his fault. She thought she had to keep this dumb date. Cripner gave her hell about it, too, right after dinner, in his den: I heard him yelling and her crying. So I was a little mad at her, maybe; but not at him, and I would have straightened her out quick enough once I—"

"That's enough, Jack," the lawyer said. "This line of questioning is irrelevant, lieutenant. Mr. Lazell and Miss Cripner enjoy a warm, mutual friendship, of which her father wholly approved. There was no conflict, and my client has nothing further to say about this matter."

"Right," Lazell said, collect-

ing himself. "Nothing further to say."

"Then let's see what you have to say about last night. You shot pool together from the time you left Cripner's den until you went to bed?"

"That's right. So we both got alibis. I never took my eyes off Art, and he never took his eyes off me. Neither of us left the room at all."

"Not at all? You drank three beers apiece, and you didn't go to the bathroom even once?"

"Nope." Lazell grinned. "See, I've got lots of self-control. Maybe that's one reason I'm a millionaire, and you're still a cop."

I hated the way he said "still a cop," as though being a cop was a stage any normal person would outgrow. On the whole, though, I was pleased with the interview. Now I could see a possible motive for Lazell, and a better one for Madeline Cripner. At least once before, her father had chased away a boyfriend of hers. If she really liked this Peter Marlowe, and her father was hot to match her up with Lazell instead, she would have good reason to fear that the same thing would happen all over again.

"It must be scary," I remarked to Bolt, "to watch the past start to repeat itself. That could make a person desperate."

He gave a little gasp. "My God, sir," he said, "you're right."

For once, I had thought of a point before he had. I felt pretty good as a local cop came into the room to say he had found Peter Marlowe.

When I saw Marlowe, I understood why Madeline Cripner hadn't wanted to break her date last night. He's in his early twenties and looks like Superman's understudy—six foot two, oversized chest and shoulders, features so regular you could graph them, wavy black hair and blue eyes. Used to be, guys like that made me feel small. But I've got my badge now, and I don't intimidate so easy.

Marlowe tried his best. "I demand to know why I'm here," he said. He wouldn't sit down, just paced. "What's all this fuss about? It's perfectly clear what happened. Mr. Cripner walked into his den, saw some burglar pawing through his personal photographs and stuff, put up a fight, and got killed. Where's the mystery? What has it got to do with me?"

"Maybe a lot," I said, in my best tough-cop voice. "You were supposed to take his daughter to a party last night. Did you ever get there?"

He paced faster. "No. We drove around and talked for a while, and then she said she had a headache. So I took her home. So what?"

"So what did you and Miss Cripner talk about? Jack Lazell, maybe? Is that what gave her a headache?"

"That's what gave me an assache." He stopped pacing and looked at me straight. "All right. You'll get it out of Maddie anyhow. She told me that she couldn't see me any more, that her father wanted her to date Lazell instead, that the wedding invitations were practically printed. Can you believe it? He needed Lazell's help with some condominium deal, so he was going to force Maddie to marry that smelly old hood."

"It's not so easy to force a girl to marry someone. What was he going to do—march her down the aisle at gunpoint?"

"Well, no," Marlowe admitted. "But Maddie — well, she's a great girl, and I know she really likes me, but she's used to a lot of clothes, a nice car, fancy vacations, all that. So when her father threatened to take those things away if she didn't date Lazell, it was as good as forcing her. Daddy held the purse strings, so she did as he said. She always has."

"But this time you were in the way," I said, remembering how Cripner had shipped Stearn's son off to England. "Maybe you were afraid her father planned to get rid of you. With Lazell advising him, you'd

have good reason to worry, to think you had to strike out to protect yourself."

Marlowe snorted contemptuously. "I wasn't afraid of Cripner. He'd never dare lay a hand on me. Pushing Maddie around is more his style. They all push her around. Whenever I'm here, the housekeeper follows us from room to room, making sure I don't step out of line. And that secretary! From the way he watches Maddie, you'd think he was in love with her himself."

"That's not very likely, is it? He's old enough to be her father. No, Cripner's the one you were worried about, and now Cripner's the one who's dead. You said he'd never lay a hand on you. Are you sure you never laid a hand on him?"

Marlowe swallowed hard. "I didn't kill him," he said at last.

"No? What *did* you do after you brought Miss Cripner home?"

"Not much. I drove around, stopped at a few bars, had a few drinks."

"Maybe you had a few drinks too many? Maybe you came back here to have it out with Cripner, and ended up bashing in his head? So now your girlfriend gets the money she wants so much, and you get her—no more Daddy around to make her marry mean old Jack

Lazell. Pretty nice, I'd say."

"I didn't kill him! All I wanted—no." He stopped suddenly. "That's it. No more questions. I'm calling my father's lawyer."

"Smart move," I said cordially. When he left the room, I turned around to smile at Bolt. "Things are heating up, aren't they?"

He looked dazed. "It's almost impossible for me to keep up with you. The way you kept jabbing at him, throwing out hints to see how much he knows, how deeply he's involved! I've never seen an interrogation handled so deftly. It was shrewd, sir—very shrewd."

"Thank you," I said, and wondered what the hell I had done.

Madeline Cripner provided a spectacular climax to the morning. She's tall and willowy, and she's got long blonde hair that doesn't look dyed, and dark green eyes, and plenty of other assets, too; but maybe I better not tell you about them. Ellen already clobbered me for just barely alluding to them at dinner the other night. She wore a black silk dress—a little low-cut for morning, really, but maybe it was the only black dress she owned, and naturally she'd want to show respect for her father.

I got her to confirm what the others had said about when she

left last night and when she got back. "Now, Miss Cripner," I said, "why didn't you go to the den to say goodnight to your father when you got home? Didn't you usually do that after an evening out?"

"Yes," she said, plucking a speck of lint from her dress, "but I had a headache. Besides, Agnes said Mr. Stearn had left just fifteen minutes before, so I figured Daddy wasn't back from his walk yet. And I didn't want to spoil my shoes walking out on the damp grounds."

It sounded perfectly reasonable to me. I leaned forward over the desk. "Were you also just the tiniest bit annoyed with him? You'd had an upsetting conversation after dinner, hadn't you?"

She looked at me and blinked. The disappearance and re-emergence of those eyes made me sag. "Not really. When he told me not to date Peter any more, I was disappointed, but not angry. Daddy wanted the best for me, and he didn't think Peter was the best. I could understand how he felt. I think it's important to be able to put yourself in another person's place, to feel what he feels, to—to—"

"To walk in his shoes," I supplied. She's beautiful, but not quite bright enough to complete a cliché without help.

"Exactly." She rewarded me with a smile and another blink.

I had to look at my notes to remember what came next. "I hear there was a little misunderstanding seven years ago, about you and Mr. Stearn's son. That's when he left for England, right? And you left, too—for three days, I think." I hated to mention it. "Will you tell us about that?"

Her eyes clouded up. "I was only fifteen," she said, almost sobbing. "And he was the first boy I ever really liked, and we hadn't done anything wrong—I mean, back then I didn't even know *how* to do anything wrong—so I was real upset, and I went to stay with a girlfriend at Edson College, and Daddy hired a private detective, and he found me and brought me home, and I said I was sorry; and since then I've always done what Daddy told me to do, and I don't know why people have to keep bringing it up." She sniffled.

I started to apologize but caught myself in time. "I see. Now, did your father ever discuss his will with you? Do you know what he left you?"

"Not really." She gave a graceful little shrug. "Daddy always said I'd be provided for. That means the house, I suppose. And the business, the bank accounts, the stocks—not

that I know much about that sort of thing. I'll have to find somebody to advise me."

"Jack Lazell, maybe?" I suggested.

The eyes blazed emerald. "Not bloody likely. I told that creep and his lawyer they had an hour to clear out of my house, or I'd have Agnes Webster sweep them out with the other garbage. Those condominiums never would have turned a profit anyway, not with the market as glutted as it is, and the new highway sure to be rerouted, and the price of insulation up twelve percent. We're better off diversifying." She stopped short and batted her eyes back into innocence. "Of course, that's just based on my feminine intuition. I've never paid any attention to Daddy's business."

I hated to admit it, but she was my best suspect. After she left, I looked through my notes and sighed. The most common motives for murder are love and money, and she had them both in spades. Still, any of the others could have done it, too: I didn't see how we could be sure of who the murderer was. I stood up and looked at Bolt in defeat.

"It's puzzling, isn't it?" I said.

"It's always puzzling," he agreed. "Why does a law-abiding person turn to crime? But he must have been desperate."

"He." Bolt had said "he." So it couldn't have been Madeline Cripner, or Agnes Webster. And "law-abiding" ruled out Lazell. I ran through the remaining suspects. "You mean Peter Marlowe?" I asked.

For a second, Bolt looked confused, and then he chuckled. "As usual, you're way ahead of me, sir. Of course: Marlowe committed a crime, too. Failure to report a felony—that's very serious. We'll have to charge him. But I was still thinking about the murderer himself. About Eliot Stearn."

That was the moment, Mother. I should have told Bolt that Stearn had been fourth on my list. But I didn't have the guts.

"Eliot Stearn," I said, and didn't put a question mark after the name.

It was all Bolt needed. "I don't know how you figured it out so quickly, sir. It wasn't until you made that remark about the past repeating itself that I saw how it all fit together. Once before, Stearn had seen a young woman he loved trapped in an unhappy marriage to a wealthy, crude man twice her age. I bet he begged Mrs. Cripner to leave her husband and marry him. But she was like her daughter—pampered, as Agnes Webster said, too dependent on the things Cripner could buy

for her. It's ironic, isn't it? Stearn and Mrs. Cripner probably fell in love when they were out spending her husband's money. Webster said Mrs. Cripner liked to shop, and picking out Cripner's furniture was part of Stearn's job. It would make sense for them to shop together, especially since they had a house to furnish." He paused to look again at the wallpaper, the carpet, the dainty furniture that undoubtedly didn't reflect Cripner's own tastes. "Maybe they were buying things for this very room when they first felt the attraction. And then everything else followed. Including Madeline Cripner."

I didn't say anything, just leaned against the desk for support and shook my head. To tell the absolute truth, I felt a little faint. Bolt had apparently took the head shake as a reaction to human weakness.

"I should have seen it sooner," he said. "It didn't make sense otherwise—Stearn's over-reaction to what sounds like an innocent teenage romance. Most fathers in that situation would give their sons a good talking-to. Instead, Stearn sends his only son out of the country. He wouldn't do that unless he had a special reason for being absolutely terrified, absolutely determined that the romance go no further. He wouldn't do

that unless his son was Madeline Cripner's half-brother."

It was too much. I had to admit that I'd missed that completely. "How did you figure it out?" I asked.

But Bolt didn't realize it was a confession. He thought it was a test. "Oh, it wasn't hard, sir, not with the hints you gave me—like that remark to Marlowe about Stearn's being old enough to be Miss Cripner's father. Did you think Stearn might have admitted it to him, perhaps to get his help with the murder? But Marlowe didn't react, so he probably didn't know. He sure reacted when you asked him if he'd ever laid a hand on Cripner, though. So you think Marlowe wasn't mixed up in the murder itself, that he's just the one who moved the body afterward?"

I gave up. "Probably," I said, and sat down again to listen.

"Let me see if I've got that part straight," Bolt continued. "After dropping Miss Cripner off, Marlowe drove around, had a few drinks, and by two o'clock was drunk enough to drive back here to confront Cripner. It was his car Agnes Webster heard. So he sees the light in the den and goes to the french windows. He finds the lock broken and looks in to see Cripner on the floor—face down, since he was hit from behind and fell for-

ward. Marlowe goes in, turns Cripner over, and sees he's dead. That's why Cripner was on his back when Webster found him this morning and was so struck by his eyes staring up at her. Marlowe panics and takes off. But he makes a mistake when you question him: he says the burglar was pawing through Cripner's photographs. When the body was found this morning, it was lying on top of the photograph: no one saw it until the body was put on the stretcher. Marlowe couldn't have known about it unless he was in the den before the body was moved, unless he was the one who rolled Cripner over onto the photograph." Bolt paused modestly. "Am I right so far, sir?"

"Oh, yes," I said, waving a hand weakly. "Perfectly right."

Bolt beamed at me gratefully. "Thank you, sir. That photograph's the key to a lot, isn't it? I can see why Stearn threw it on the floor when he came back to fake the burglary. It must have made him pretty bitter to see a picture of Cripner with his arm around the woman Stearn loved, holding the child Stearn had fathered but had to call 'Miss Cripner.' And just think how Stearn felt when he saw his daughter being pushed toward a marriage with Lazell! He knew she wouldn't stand up

to Cripner: ever since that incident seven years ago, she'd always followed Cripner's orders because she was biding her time, waiting to inherit. She probably didn't realize how much she'd suffer married to Lazell, but Stearn did—he'd seen that kind of marriage before. He had to save her, so he did the only thing he could do. He murdered Cripner."

I still didn't see how Stearn had managed it, but I didn't want to say so. "It was a damn clever murder," I ventured.

Bolt shrugged. "Not so very clever. Unless you mean the part about the bicycle."

I jerked my head back in astonishment. "What bicycle?" I demanded.

"Does it matter what bicycle? His son's, I suppose: a seventeen-year-old boy would naturally have a bicycle, and he'd hardly ship it to England. We'll probably find it in Stearn's basement. Let's see: he murdered Cripner at nine o'clock, right after Lazell and Hare left the den. It was safe to leave the body there because Miss Cripner wasn't expected home for hours, and no one else ever disturbed Cripner in his den. So Stearn drives home, parks his noisy car in front to bolster his alibi, and leaves by the back door to pedal quietly back here and fake the burglary. I bet

we'll find some bicycle tracks somewhere along the way."

Bicycle tracks. That made me think of footprints, and I had a sudden spurt of hope. Bolt wasn't smarter than I was after all. His theory wouldn't wash: the timing was wrong. "Cripner's shoes—" I began.

"—were crucial to Stearn's plan," Bolt cut in. If the man has a fault, it's interrupting. "I realize that, sir. Stearn tried to make us think the murder was committed long after he left the house. When he got back here, he put on Cripner's shoes, took a quick walk around the grounds, and threw a cigar butt in the pool. When we found the mud on Cripner's shoes and the matching footprints, it was natural to conclude he was murdered after he took his walk." He looked at me curiously. "When Miss Cripner was in here and you made the crack about walking in someone else's shoes, was that a hint to help me figure it out? Or is that the sort of inside joke you detectives enjoy?"

"It wasn't a joke," I admitted.

"So it was a hint. I appreciate it, sir. Actually, though, the cigar butt had already tipped me off. Stearn himself told us Cripner liked things to look nice: that's why he hired an Oxford man to do his shopping. So why would he throw a cigar butt in

the pool, especially when he had guests he wanted to impress? But if Stearn smoked the cigar and didn't want us to find his saliva on the butt, he'd have a good reason for throwing it in the pool. He'd figured it all out very carefully. But he hadn't figured on having *you* assigned to the case." Bolt's adoring gaze warmed his glasses. "And he hadn't figured on Miss Cripner coming home so early."

"No," I agreed, not knowing why it mattered. "He hadn't figured on that."

Bolt nodded. "He thought she'd be gone several hours, come in the den as usual to say goodnight when she got home, find the body, and alert the household. The coroner would rule that Cripner had been dead for hours, and all the witnesses at the party could swear she'd been miles away when he was killed. As it was, Stearn unintentionally made his daughter the prime suspect. He must be worried sick right now, afraid she'll be arrested." He paused reflectively. "You know, I bet he'll be half-relieved when we arrest him instead."

Bolt was right about that, as he was about everything else. We found the bicycle in Stearn's basement, and the matching tracks in a field near Cripner's house. Stearn confessed without much fuss. The biggest sur-

prise has been the way Madeline Cripner's behaved. Once she found out that Stearn's her real father, she hired him a team of fancy lawyers, and she's visited him in jail almost every day. I've seen him several times myself, and he seems almost cheerful. At least he can finally claim his daughter. And I think the judge and jury will go as easy as they can on him. His motive's going to win him a lot of sympathy.

As for me, I'm a damn hero. Right after the arrest, Bolt rushed back to the station to tell everyone how brilliant I'd been, how dazzled he was by my deductions. So everyone's shaking my hand, congratulating me, practically asking for my autograph. Yesterday, the captain took me to lunch and dropped some pretty broad hints about hoping he can turn his desk over to me when he retires. I tried to give Bolt some credit—honest, Mother, I really did—but that only made it worse. No one believed me. So now, in addition to being thought of as the world's best detective, I'm considered the world's most gracious cop. I can't stand it.

Ellen says that she's sick of listening to me moan, that I should just make everyone see the truth, no matter how hard or embarrassing it is. She says

that between her salary and mine, we'll get along fine even if I don't get promoted. But I can't help thinking that I'd make a good captain, and that we really need a new furnace. Mother, what should I do?

I'm enclosing some pictures from Kevin's birthday party. Ellen says to tell you that she tried your walnut bread recipe, and it tasted good but burned on the bottom.

Your loving son,
Walt

Dear Walt,

Thank you for the pictures. Kevin's turning into quite a handsome young man; but why did you ever let him get that haircut? Tell Ellen to try putting the rack up a notch higher in the oven.

As for the rest, it's always best to tell the truth. I thought we'd established that when you were eight years old and saw

Bruce Lane copying from Barbara Stoddard's arithmetic test. But if you still find telling the truth hard, ask yourself if things are so bad as they are. You caught the murderer, didn't you? And Mr. Bolt is happy, isn't he? And did it ever occur to you that he might not be so brilliant if he didn't have so much faith in you, if he didn't hang on your every word so eagerly?

I think you should invite him to dinner. He'd probably enjoy that more than he'd enjoy a lot of recognition he wouldn't know how to handle. And you needn't feel guilty about the praise or the possible promotion. You're a fine, hard-working policeman, and you deserve everything you get. I do wish you'd watch your language, though. I counted three *damn's* in your letter, and that's really too many, especially when you're writing to

Your loving
Mother

FICTION

The Median Life

by David Pierce

Illustration by Peter D. Fasolino

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The interstate median was so overgrown with brush and trees that anything could have been hiding in there: a state trooper with a radar gun, an elephant escaped from the circus, or even an alien from another planet who had come to Earth to collect aluminum cans.

That's where I first met Renson. I'd had a blowout and, after seeing there was no spare tire in the trunk but plenty of room for a set of golf clubs, I decided to hike back to the last exit by going through the median, remembering a rest stop about a mile back where I could surely find a phone.

"Hello there!" a man greeted me as I entered a secluded clearing. He undressed as he spoke, or at least he was taking off the top layer of his clothing, which consisted of a pair of baggy dark green pants and a flannel shirt that was soiled and faded. He pulled off an old baseball cap and scratched his scalp furiously. "That's better," he said. He rolled the raggedy clothes up like a Sunday newspaper and stuffed them into a silky pouch. Underneath this first layer of clothing he wore a smooth, glossy one-piece suit, something like a cross between Captain Kirk's and a student of a Jane Fonda workout's. "My name's Renson, from the planet

Ardon. Where are you from? Altra? Constain?"

Other than the Halloween costume, I'd have never guessed he wasn't a local. He had an earthly body, two arms, two legs, and no membranous, multi-eyed head that constantly oozed solar slime.

"Congressman Willis," I introduced myself, using my professional title as a matter of habit. "I live about twenty miles from here." Ambassador from another planet? Doppelganger? Wacko? My curiosity was greatly piqued.

"Oh? A native?" he said, just as curious. "Don't see too many of you in these parts."

"These parts?"

"You know. Middle Land. It seems the place is overrun now with Smarians and Wylocks. Can't get a decent day's work. You know how that goes. Once word gets out about a new hot spot, it doesn't take long to flood the place." He picked up a bulging black Hefty bag. "Didn't do too badly today, though." He shook the bag and it made a metallic rattling sound like a bag full of aluminum cans.

"Have a nice day," he said, and turned to leave. "Oh, by the way," he stopped before he had gotten to the edge of the clearing, "if you're going to be traveling through here very much, watch out for the Garvons.

They've finally gotten bearings on this place. Had a run-in with one earlier." He shook his head grimly. "Once they show up, you can kiss happy hunting goodbye." He waved a hand airily before him to show how easily happy hunting could go.

"Have a nice day, Congressman Willis," he said, and then disappeared into the undergrowth, carrying the Hefty bag across his shoulder like Santa Claus.

For a moment I stood and laughed at the lunacy of this encounter. I had never met a real-life wacko before. I once had a whole commune of constituents, over five hundred people, try to evade federal taxation by claiming they were from some fictitious planet called Lovetron. Just looking for an easy ride, I figured. I wondered if this Renson character could be one of them.

In the middle of the clearing I spotted a small pile of charred debris that was still smoldering, a campfire not properly extinguished. All of a sudden I disliked the personable and friendly wacko. An improperly extinguished campfire could be disastrous. I knew because last year my pet project in Washington had been the prevention of forest fires. (This year it was the billboard problem along the interstates.)

I found a good-sized digging stick and knelt down by the charred circle. "AAAHHGG!" I protested the fetid aroma, an odor I imagined soured yogurt would make if spread over smoldering logs. I poked at one of the small logs, holding my breath, and rolled it over, trying to smother it in the ashes. That was when I saw, undoubtedly, the long, slender fingers on one end.

I screamed, choked, backed away, and fell against a small tree that I hugged like an old friend and kept repeating, "911 . . . 911 . . . 911," so as not to forget this number whenever I did get to a phone.

Before I could fully appreciate the support of my tree friend, a small explosion just above my head snapped its trunk as if it were a twig, and thousands of toothpicks rained down around me. I followed the trunk to the ground and from the corner of my eye watched the leafy top of the tree parachute down and land softly in the clearing. Small fingers of fire danced on the nub of a trunk that was left.

I sat up on my knees and searched the woods for my wacko friend, who apparently dealt in heavy arms. What was his name? Renson? I didn't see him, but I saw someone else coming and the sight of this stranger frightened me. He was about

the same size as Renson, but his face was longer and distorted as if it were made of silly putty. His hands were huge, club-like, and in one of them he held a small box-shaped weapon with a glowing red eye on one end.

"Where is your find?" this thing growled. His mouth was like a vertical mail slot with a row of teeth on each side.

I shook my head and backed away on my knees, not knowing what the heck he was talking about. He pushed his long face up close until his pug nose nearly touched mine. "*Where is it?*" he demanded. He grabbed one of my hands in one of his—it was as big as a baseball glove—and squeezed unmercifully. I heard some bones snap but felt no pain, only a great pressure. When he released his grip, however, and the crushed nerves were again able to do their thing, they sent a message back to my brain that told my mouth to make a funny "OOOAAHHH" scream.

"Answer me!" He trained the weapon with the little red eye on me. There was no mistaking he was intending to turn me into human toothpicks.

I was about to sing like a canary when all of a sudden the alien blew up, disintegrated without even a chance to squeal. One moment he's training a nuke on me, just an ounce of

pressure on the trigger finger and I'd have been atomized. And the next moment he's gone—only a pile of charred ruins remained. The fetid stench of burning, soured yogurt was strong. Two blackened limbs lay crisscrossed, smoldering like a deserted campfire.

"That's two in one day," said my good, good friend Renson, who appeared from behind some trees. He holstered his weapon and walked toward me.

"What's going on here?" I screamed. I was rightfully panicked.

"He's one of the Garvons I warned you about. A nasty bunch. We work our tails off for centuries and these goons think they can just tag along and take easy pickings." He kicked at the limbs angrily. I couldn't tell whether they were arms or legs or one of each.

The pain in my hand caused me to yell out again. My fingers had turned a deep, dark purple, almost black. My entire hand had swollen until it was as big as a Garvon's.

"Hurts. pretty bad, huh?" Renson asked. I was hurting too much to be ironic. I nodded my head vehemently and tears fell like salt from a shaker. Renson looked about the clearing and deliberated. Finally he knelt beside me. "I'll take care of this." He opened the Hefty bag

and I saw why the contents had sounded like aluminum cans—they were aluminum cans, hundreds of them.

He took a single can (a light beer, I believe) and turned it upside down to shake out the last stale drop. "Okay, now be still and this will hardly hurt at all." I trusted him. Someone who has trekked across the universe looking for aluminum cans, and who could turn you into a potpie with the push of a trigger, was someone I wanted on my side.

He produced a pouch I had not seen before and from it a squirt of the clear solar slime that had been missing earlier. Then, as if he were mixing a galactic cocktail, he brought the can and his secret ingredient together, crushing the can as if he were Deacon Jones. There was the sizzling sound of bacon frying as he clasped his two hands and this newly concocted poultice around my ragged hand. A silvery-colored slime oozed from between his fingers. I felt a slight burning sensation and tried to pull away, but he held tightly. The pressure soon eased the pain and, after a few moments, Renson released my hand. I pulled it close to me, exercising the fingers. A thin, waxy film made my hand shiny, but the purple was gone. The pain was gone.

Everything was normal.

"How'd you do that?"

He smiled proudly. "Nothing magic, I promise. Just a little chemical engineering."

"The cans?"

"Yeah. Great stuff. Nothing like them on Ardon. Or Altra or Constain, for that matter. We all have our own mining teams. We were the first to find this system a few years ago, and we had it to ourselves for a while. Quick and easy money." He looked toward the undergrowth and shook his head sadly. "The market's getting too competitive, though. Everywhere is too crowded. And, I guess as in every business," he jerked his head in the direction of the smoldering extremities, "you've got your pirates. Never used to have to carry one of these." He indicated his weapon; it looked more like a TV remote controller than a devastator.

I rose to my feet, still stunned by what was happening. I began wondering if I were the one who had gone wacko. Or maybe I had flipped the car when the tire blew out and was now lying in a hospital bed in a coma, having an out-of-body experience.

"Well, look, I've got to hike a pretty good ways back to the ship and still make a check-point today or it'll be another month before one will be this close again." He surveyed the

surrounding growth suspiciously. "I wouldn't hang out here too long if I were you."

"Thank you," I said, my voice paper thin.

He acknowledged my thanks with a nod and, with the bag across his shoulder, turned to leave me again. But before he could cross the clearing, a long-faced, bludgeon-handed Garvon stopped him. Two more Garvons appeared and bound him with only their hands. Renson's struggle was brief. One took his Hefty bag full of cans and shook it triumphantly while the others cheered. I turned to run. Maybe my friend knew how to fight Garvons, but I didn't. Four more poured forth from the undergrowth. Each one held up his own little TV remote controller and seemed eager to change my channel.

"Uh-oh," Renson said, looking at me almost apologetically. They bound us both and carried us away.

There were seven of them altogether. I bounced painfully across one's shoulder, his hands gripping the back of my legs. They carried us probably half a mile through the median undergrowth. I could hear the zoom of east and west bound traffic on each side. We threaded our way through the trees. The smaller ones the Garvons

pushed aside, breaking them off at the ground.

They threw Renson and me into a cage that had no door. One of them simply grabbed the bars and pulled them apart as if they were made of Play-Doh, and after we were inside, he squeezed them back into place, leaving a gap too small to think about escaping through. I tried to move the bars after they'd left, but they were as rigid as steel.

A few feet away was a spaceship nestled in the undergrowth, slain trees poking out from beneath. All seven Garvons boarded the ship, leaving Renson's black Hefty bag on the ground not far away and Renson and me alone in the cage like a pair of exotic birds. Renson sat on the ground across from me. Without his blaster, he was as helpless as I was.

"I was just looking for a phone," I explained. "I had a flat tire, you know." I could see my sanity dangling from a fraying rope as clearly as a sharply-focused photograph. Renson nodded noncommittally. "I have to vote on legislation tomorrow," I continued to babble. "I'm a congressman. Did I tell you that? Had dinner with the president once." Again he nodded, his face as blank as an empty page.

My belly growled and I

wanted to scold it for begging at such an inopportune time. In my shirt pocket I found some chewing gum, spearmint. "Want some gum?" Renson waved me off.

"If I could just get to those cans for two seconds," Renson said, the wheels clearly turning. His attempt at rational thinking helped me to get a better hold on that fraying rope.

"What is it with the cans?" I asked.

He looked at me unbelievably. "It's not the *cans*. It's the *element*. I think you call it aluminum. As I told you, there's nothing like it on my planet. Of course there's nothing like this on your planet either." He patted the bottle of solar slime. "By itself, it is nothing. We discarded it for eons, much as you do your aluminum. But mix these two elements together and they become the purest form of energy. We can heal ourselves, grow our food, and fuel our ships.

"We first discovered this aluminum centuries ago in other systems. But we *never* steal," he reminded me. "Most of the independent mining companies don't. Aluminum seems to be the type of element most beings find temporary uses for and then discard. So I put on a guise most appropriate to whatever planet I'm on—" I remembered

the old pants and shirt and ball cap—"and start collecting."

"But why here in the median?"

"Are you kidding? Middle Land is perfect." The name he had given to the wooded buffer between lanes of interstate made me smile. "There's plenty of cover to land my ship, hardly any natives pass through, except in cases like yourself, and most of the mining can be done without much walking. I just head down the highway and it's there for the taking."

"What about these Garvons?"

"Well . . ." Again he was almost apologetic. "They've taken *there for the taking* a bit too far. They're nothing but thieves. Too lazy to work for themselves. I used to think the Lovetrans were lazy, always looking for a free ride—" now I knew I was dreaming and expected to see my old high school gym teacher running by in his skivvies—"but Garvon is also a violent planet. Whereas we use this energy for food and healing, they use it for weapons, for fuel for warships, and to heal wounds suffered in wars. More than once when they've set their teeth into a planet—" He stopped and looked away as if he had said too much.

"They what?"

"Never mind. That's not important to us right now, is it?"

Selfishly my concern swayed from the fate of Earth to my own neck.

A pneumatic hissing sound caused us both to look toward the Garvon ship. A door opened and two of the Garvons came down a ramp. They stopped outside our cage and studied Renson and me as if we were the prize exhibit at the zoo. They began to talk in a foreign language. Renson concentrated.

"What are they saying?" I whispered.

He listened a little longer before turning to me. "They're trying to decide which one of us to eat first."

It didn't take the Garvons long to decide that I'd be the appetizer. Renson was probably twenty pounds heavier, so I guess he deserved to be the main course.

One of the aliens pulled the bars apart while the other one reached through the gaping hole and seized me in his vise-like hands. Renson screamed something in their language which I repeated as best I could, hoping it was profanity. I learned that laughter was truly a universal language, for both aliens were unmistakably guffawing. The Garvon pulled me up close to his face. His long, vertical mouth, I could plainly see, had too many teeth and numerous

cavities. Never brush after meals, huh? I thought crazily.

The Garvon continued to squeeze me, tighter and tighter until my lungs were empty. Then, remarkably, he stopped squeezing and let me go. I fell at his feet and looked up to see the Garvon clawing at his own throat and gasping for air. There was a faint squeak—the sound of air passing through a tiny opening—and then the Garvon fell and lay still.

The other alien, who had watched in awe, now bellowed with anger and grabbed me up from the ground. He pulled me close to him also and his long, vertical mouth opened to the size of a bucket. I screamed into the hole and heard the scream echoed. Then this Garvon dropped me, too. Soon he was lying beside the first one, as still as a stone.

Renson sprang from the cage and to the side of the felled Garvons. He checked over both of them and said, "They're dead. How'd you do that?"

"I—don't know," I answered, nervous, excited, and not wanting to be premature with the celebration.

"That *stuff* you're chewing. What's in it?" His tone said *hurry, hurry*.

"Sugar?" I said. Renson shook his head. "Gum?" Again a shake. "Spearmint?"

"That's it!" he shouted. "Must be. I've never heard of it. Imagine, something so sweet to you is a poison to the Garvons. Haha! Quick, give me some!" I fumbled in my shirt pocket for the gum, my shoulders still aching from the first Garvon's crushing grip. Renson ripped off the paper and stuffed four sticks into his mouth. He chewed with exaggeration.

"Now let's take care of the rest of them," Renson said boldly. He grabbed his Hefty bag and clinked and clanked to the top of the ramp. The door hissed open unexpectedly and Renson found himself face to face with another Garvon. Renson killed him with one blow.

Standing in the doorway, he emptied the whole bottle of solar slime into the bag with the cans. Then he twisted the top and shook the bag like a giant Shake'n'Bake recipe. He tossed the bag through the open door and tore back down the ramp. "Cover!" he shouted.

I scrambled on all fours and flattened out on my belly behind some trees. I covered my head with my arms to protect it from the noise of the explosion and the rain of the tiny pieces of spaceship and Garvons. A silvery slime coated everything, leaving no opportunity for flames. To someone driving by only twenty yards

away, the noise could have been a tire blowout.

Over the next few months I did a lot to save the world. But I knew things like that would never show up on my voting record.

I introduced a bill and fought like hell for it: instead of cutting back on or banning all the billboards, why not plant more trees in the grassy median areas? This would cut the problem in half because east bound traffic wouldn't be able to see billboards in the west bound lane and vice versa.

And then plant some low growing foliage, something that would spread and help to blanket the area and inhibit accidental fires. Something perennial. Something like—spear-mint plant.

The ecologists and environmentalists loved the idea. They loved to see plants grow, especially if government dollars were paying. Soon a vote for trees was a popular vote to have on record. Other congressmen followed suit for their states; and so this country became a little greener and a little sweeter, too sweet for certain aliens to be sinking their teeth into.

One afternoon recently my wife and I were driving along

I-24 with a new spare tire packed safely in the trunk. A yellow, dinosaur-looking piece of machinery was parked in the grassy median. The bucket on the front scooped out holes faster than the workers could fill them with saplings. Middle Land was growing, spreading out like a Garvon stretching his cramped fingers.

I drank the last of my diet Coke and rolled down the window. A lone man wearing rags and dragging a half-filled Hefty bag behind him was walking along the shoulder of the inter-

state. He wasn't Renson. Maybe someone from Altra or Con-stain. Or maybe a Wylock or Smarian. At any rate, I flung the can and watched in my mirror as it skipped across the asphalt and disappeared in the weedy median.

"Honey! What are you doing?" My wife was aghast. "What would your constituents think if they knew you littered the highways like that?"

I smiled lovingly, knowing this only irritated her, and said, "I guess there are some things they'll just never know, huh?"

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FICTION

Déjà Vu

by Doug Allyn

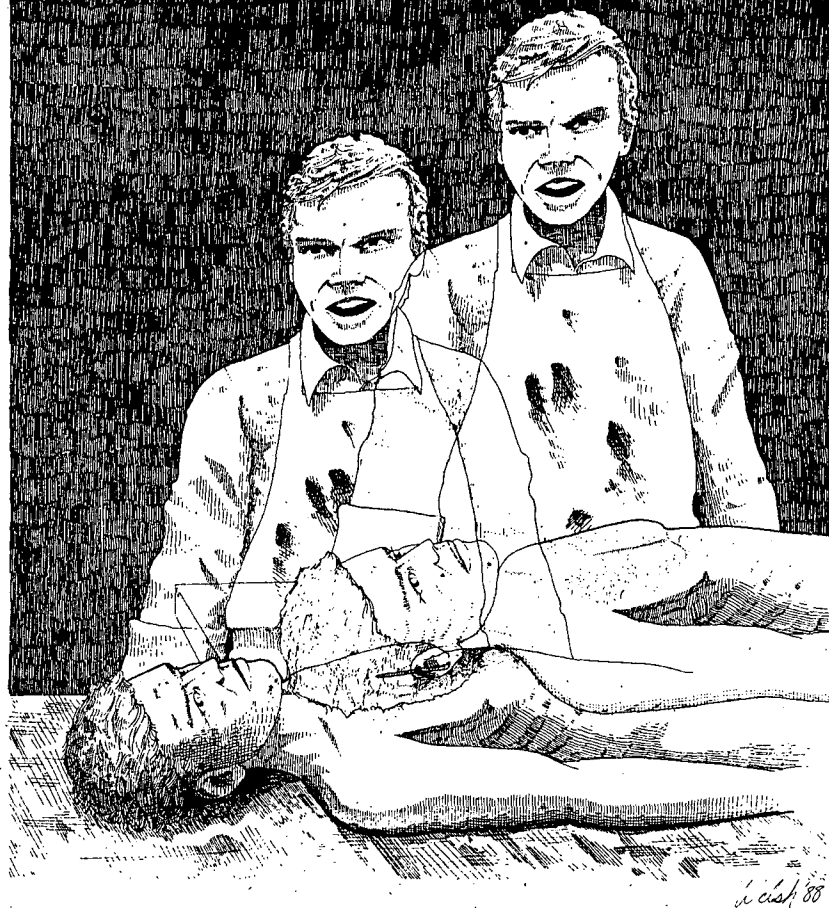


Illustration by Patrick J. Welsh

36

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Something about the corpse was getting on Maxwell's nerves. As he moved around the nude body on the table, methodically spritzing it down with Dis-Spray disinfectant, Max's glance kept straying to the guy's face. The corpse had been male-model-handsome, distinguished, a guy who'd pitch custom tailored suits in a TV commercial. Square features, curly brown hair showing a little gray at the temples, glazed gray eyes gazing vacantly up at the fly-specked fluorescent tube dangling from the ceiling. Somebody hadn't been too taken with his looks, though; they'd roughed him up pretty thoroughly and made a fair start at cutting out his heart.

His face was bloodied and battered, his bridgework was broken, collarbone appeared to be broken, too, and there were a couple of deep, ugly gashes amid the salt and pepper thatch on his chest. Straight razor, Max guessed, or a honed linoleum blade. Still, it wasn't the way the guy'd checked out that was nibbling at him, he'd worked on murder victims before, more than he could count. It was something . . .

"Mr. Kerabatsos, do you know this guy?" Max asked. "Is he from around here?"

The Greek shook his head

without looking up from the shriveled crone with blue-rinsed hair he was soaping down on the mortuary lab's other table. He did solid, competent work, the Greek. When he finished pumping the old woman full of Permaglo and doing her make-up, she'd look like she'd dozed off in the middle of a Lawrence Welk rerun. "Don't know nothing 'bout him," he grunted. "Got a call around six from guy's boss, ax me to pick him up at Wayne County morgue. Why?"

"I don't know," Max said, "something about him . . ."

"A relative maybe? He look a little bit like you, you know."

"I never had a relative that looked this good."

"Then somebody you seen around? Maybe in a bar?" the Greek added pointedly.

"I—don't think so," Maxwell said, frowning, "can't recall him offhand anyway." But maybe the Greek was right. It happens sometimes, even in a town the size of Detroit. You work long enough as a gypsy mortician, occasionally you get somebody you know on the table. Max had seen a few over the years, a woman from his apartment building, a baseball player from his high school class. And when it happens, it makes you think. How long before it's your turn on the stainless steel slab with the Porti-Boy pumping your

precious bodilies into a plastic bag? And then what?

Max examined the dead man's face carefully, taking his time, trying to place him. Nothing. And yet . . . he seemed familiar. Or something.

The hell with it. Max peeled off his latex gloves, dropped them on the guy's lap, and sauntered over to the coat rack for a taste. He tugged the pint bottle of Absolut out of his sportcoat pocket and checked the level on it. Half empty. Or was it half full? Either way it was half gone, and it had to last him until the next afternoon when he'd get paid. Kerabatsos glanced up at him, but made no comment. The Greek knew he liked a belt now and then. But he also knew Max looked good in a black suit, could make a train wreck victim presentable, and, most important, worked cheap.

Max glanced around the room as he nipped at the vodka. A dump, no doubt about it. Paint peeling off the cinder block walls, two dingy stainless steel tables smudged with a bouillabaisse of body fluids, the kind of a place where they expect you to wipe down your disposable apron and leave it for the next guy. Nothing like the upscale funeral homes he'd worked when he got out of the army back in '72. He . . .

Something clicked in a corner of his memory. The army. Was the corpse somebody he'd known back then? He wandered over to the counter and picked up the death certificate. Bronfman. Edgar L. The name didn't ring a bell. Date of birth: 10 June 52. Cause of death: cardiac trauma/edged weapon, which in parts of Detroit is almost death due to natural causes. With luck, the guy was so high he didn't feel much pain. He was obviously heavy into coke, the inside of his nose looked like he'd been snorting Drano. Still, there were worse ways to go. The last time it was—

Max froze, the bottle halfway to his lips. The last time . . . the guy'd died from a broken neck. In an auto accident.

He stalked back to the table, stared down at the corpse, then back at the death certificate. Bronfman. Edgar L. The name didn't seem right, but it was the same man, he was sure of it. He'd worked half the night reassembling that face. The last time. The guy was one of the first jobs he'd ever done by himself. Back in '72.

"Hey," Kerabatsos said, "you gonna do some work? I wanna get home sometime tonight."

Max ignored him, trying to make sense of the situation. Could he be a son, maybe? No,

this guy was too old to be the son of—the other one. Or his brother? Maybe a twin brother? That had to be it. Except that he was getting a glimmer of the first guy's name in the back of his mind. Connolly? Connery? Something like that. Definitely not Bronfman, though. Not even close. He'd been working at Esperanza's in Highland Park, his first job after the army. And you don't forget your first love, or your first car. Or your first client. And if Connolly or Bronfman or whatever wasn't his first body, he was close enough to it so he remembered—

"Come on, Maxwell," the Greek sighed, "how about—"

"Get off my back!" Max snapped.

The Greek scowled, but let it pass. It was late, and sometimes the work made people edgy, even a pro like Max. "Whatsamatta with you?" Kerabatsos said. "You got a problem?"

Max glanced involuntarily at the corpse again, then took a deep breath. "No," he said, swallowing, "no problem. Sorry."

"You wrong, Max," the Greek said, "your problem's in that bottle there." He turned his back on Max as he moved around the table aspirating the old woman's vital organs, working off his irritation on her.

Maxwell studied the half-empty pint of vodka. Maybe the Greek was right. Maybe it was finally happening. God knows he'd been juicing long enough. Isn't this how it begins? First the memory plays tricks, then you wake up in strange places and can't remember how you got there, then—

Nuts. No way. He'd been boozing off and on since his first wife took a walk. He could handle it, and he knew damn well he was still playing with a full deck. And he was just as sure he remembered the man on the table. He took a quick nip out of the bottle. And got nothing. It was empty. Max stared at it stupidly for a moment, then at the corpse. And then he hurled the bottle at the wall.

"Hey!" Kerabatsos yelled, ducking away from the hail of broken glass. "What the hell's with you?"

"Is something wrong?" Linda asked. "Something going on I should know about?" She was dressed for work, wearing a prim navy outfit that only needed medals to make it a uniform. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a taut chignon, and she looked scrubbed and serious and grim, without a trace of makeup. There'd been a time when she'd touched up her face

first thing in the morning. But not lately. A bad omen, and a familiar one.

"No," he lied, sipping the scalding black instant from a quivering cup, "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. I—waited up for you until midnight or so. Did you stop off at Flynn's after work?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't," he said. "I ah, ran into a guy I used to know at the Greek's. And I went for a walk afterwards. Did some thinking."

"A guy?" she echoed skeptically. "Are you sure it was a guy?"

"It wouldn't have mattered either way, Lin," he sighed, "since the person in question was a client."

"A client? You mean you had to—work on someone you knew? Max, that must've been awful."

"You don't know the half of it."

"Look, I'm sorry if I seemed, well, you know," she said, glancing at her watch. "I've gotta run, it's my turn to open the shop today. Are you going to be all right?"

"Damned if I know," he said honestly.

"You will be," she said, giving him a sisterly peck on the forehead. "I'll call you on my lunch hour. We'll talk. Okay?" She snatched her purse from the kitchen counter and started for the door.

"I may not be here," he called after her. "I ah, I've got something to take care of."

She hesitated in the doorway, sympathy and suspicion dueling in her eyes. Suspicion won. "Max, I know your work is hard on you sometimes, but don't use whatever happened last night as an excuse to go on a bender, okay? Because if you do..." She swallowed.

"Go to work, Lin," Max said, "I'll be all right."

"You promise?"

"My word as a gentleman."

"Sure," she said doubtfully. "Right."

After she'd gone Maxwell took a long, thoughtful shower, finishing it off with an icy needle spray. He slipped on a T-shirt, jeans, and New Balance joggers. And then he called Detroit P.D. and asked to speak to the detective handling the Bronfman case.

"Sergeant Pilarski, Homicide."

"Hi, my name's Maxwell, I'm calling about Bronfman, Edgar L."

"Yessir. Do you have information to offer?"

"I'm—not sure. I was hoping you could tell me what happened to him."

"I'm afraid I can't discuss an investigation in progress, Mr. Maxwell, but anything you can tell us..."

"Did you ah—know he was

probably doing cocaine? A lot of it?"

"Yessir, we're aware of that. Would you mind telling me how you happen to know it?"

"Look, this may sound a bit strange to you, but I embalmed Mr. Bronfman last night, at the Kerabatsos Funeral Home. And ah—" Max coughed "—and I used to know him. So if you could tell me what happened I'd really appreciate it."

There was a long silence on the other end. Max could hear office noises in the background, typewriters, telephones.

"How well did you know the victim, Mr. Maxwell?"

"Not well. I haven't seen him in—years."

"And then you had to lay him out, hunh?" Pilarski said, not unsympathetically. "Musta been a helluva jolt. Well, I guess I can give you the basics, they're public record. Mr. Bronfman was spotted by a prowler car in an alley off West Lafayette around two A.M. night before last. He was already dead, apparently mugged, beaten pretty badly, and then stabbed to death. Probably cruising the area looking to score some crack and somebody took him off. We get about three cases a week just like it. We found his car this morning, or what was left of it, in a vacant lot down on the Corridor, stripped. That's about it."

"Do you have any idea who might have killed him?"

"Sure. The alley's on turf claimed by both the Pharoahs and the B.T.'s. That narrows the suspect list down to about six hundred gang members. Unless maybe you've got somebody more specific in mind?" Pilarski added hopefully.

"No, I'm afraid not. Like I said, it's been a long time."

"Well, if you think of anything that might help, give us a call, okay?"

"Just one last thing, sergeant. Does Bronfman have any family in the area?"

"I don't think so, no. We I.D.'d him from his driver's license. His assailants tossed his wallet after they lifted his cash and credit cards, but they missed his license. He apparently lived with the people he worked for. His boss came down and identified the body. Some English guy. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know, I guess I was hoping it wasn't—hell, I don't know what I was hoping. Thanks for your help, sergeant."

Max eased the receiver into its cradle before Pilarski could ask him anything else. He stared at the phone for what seemed like a very long time, mulling over what he'd been told. But the only thing he was certain of was that he was developing a major thirst. His eyes kept

straying to the small wet bar beside Linda's stereo. Not yet. First he'd better find out if he was cracking up. Esperanza's, the mortuary where he'd met Bronfman or whoever in '72, was a used car lot now, sooo . . . He grabbed the phone book, flipped through the yellow pages, called the Detroit *News*, and asked for the library.

But the *News* librarian had no record of a Bronfman killed in an auto accident in the spring of '72, nor a Connolly or Connery either.

"Look, I know the man died in a car crash in Highland Park roughly fifteen years ago," Max said. "Shouldn't you have something about it?"

"The computer shows nothing under that name, sir. If he died accidentally, though, his name might have been withheld from the story pending notification of next of kin, and unless there was a follow-up on it for some reason, it wouldn't have been entered."

"You mean you don't even rate a footnote or something for getting killed in this town?"

"Not in Detroit, no sir, or at least not in the *News*."

"What about an obituary?"

"We run obits if the family requests one, or if the deceased was a public figure, but I show no record of one under the names you gave me. You might try the

Free Press," she added, "they may have something."

She didn't sound optimistic about it, though, and she was right. The *Free Press* had no record of a Connolly or Connery either. Only Bronfman, Edgar L., crime victim, two days ago.

Which left Max with two options: accept the idea that he was losing his grip, or . . .

He picked up his car keys and grabbed a corduroy jacket from the hall closet on his way out.

The suburb of Grosse Pointe Farms is only a few miles from downtown Motown, facing Lake St. Clair, but it's light years removed from the urban jungle. Wide, elm shaded streets, multi-storied upper class homes guarded by sculptured hedges and wrought-iron fencing, set amid green velvet lawns broad enough for polo. Max followed Lake Shore Drive past the Crescent Sail Yacht Club, then turned inland toward the golf course. When he finally found the address he'd copied from Bronfman's death certificate, he doublechecked it. The estate was immense, even by Grosse Pointe standards. It was surrounded by a fieldstone wall eight feet high which seemed to stretch unbroken to the back links of the Country Club of Detroit. The gate was wrought

iron, with the name HELFORD set in large bronze letters in the center.

Max pulled his rust-spotted blue Camaro up to the gate and climbed out. A call button and speaker were set into one of the gateposts on a brass plate. He pressed the buzzer and waited, wondering what the hell he thought he was doing, wishing he'd worn a tie.

"Yes?" A man's voice. British accent. Probably an honest to God butler, Max thought.

"Uh, hi, was this the ah, residence of Edgar Bronfman?"

A moment's hesitation. "Yes. What is it?"

"My name's Maxwell, from the Kerabatsos Funeral Home? I'd like to talk to someone about Mr. Bronfman, please."

Again a pause. "Very well. Drive around to the parking area, and wait in your car. Someone will come for you."

The voice clicked off, and the massive gates hummed slowly open. Max fired up his Camaro and drove through. He followed a wide cobblestone drive along the outer wall, occasionally glimpsing what appeared to be a good-sized office building through the maze of shrubs and razor-trimmed cedars that lined the drive.

Close up, the house was even bigger than he'd expected, a huge modernist structure,

stacked on a hillside on four levels, slab-roofed, glass-walled, with long, swooping concrete ramps linking the sections of the house. The parking area was in the rear, a half-acre of concrete facing a six-car garage. There were several cars parked along the edge of the apron, a Rolls limo, a couple of Benzes, and one small red Sunbird convertible. Max backed his Camaro into a slot beside the 'Bird and waited. But not for long.

Two huge wolf-size dogs loped around the corner of the garage, black, with tan markings, and wearing seriously spiked collars, the biggest Dobermans he'd ever seen. They trotted up to the Camaro and began circling it warily, eyeing Max through the windows as they passed. A small, blocky, Oriental man in a gray business suit followed them. He snapped his fingers twice and the dogs instantly responded, taking up positions beside him. He smiled tentatively at Max and motioned him out of the car. Max hesitated, then sighed and climbed out. Even with two hundred pounds of guard dogs beside him, the little guy seemed friendly enough.

The Oriental turned and walked toward the house without a word, the dogs pacing obediently on either side. Max

followed the trio up one of the long, gradually sloped concrete ramps to the second level. In the distance, Lake St. Clair rimmed the horizon like a ring of indigo smoke. On the second level, the Oriental led him across a broad flagstone terrace to a set of french doors inset in the full-width smoked glass wall, motioned him inside, and left him, trailed by the dogs.

Max paused just inside the door, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness after the glare of the autumn afternoon. The room was a long, rectangular office/library, with book-lined walls, hardwood parquet floors, translucent ceiling panels overhead. A portly type seated at an ornate rosewood desk in the center of the room glanced up as he entered, then pointedly went back to scanning some paperwork. He looked sour and sixtyish, with thinning reddish-blond hair and a beefy, florid face, freckled and pocked like a pimiento loaf. He was dressed casually, a Harris tweed jacket with elbow patches over a dark turtleneck.

"Mr. Maxwell, is it?" he said brusquely, without looking up. "I'm Mr. Sutcliffe. What seems to be the problem?" His accent was British, the voice from the driveway speaker.

"I am," Max swallowed. "It's a little difficult—"

"Then perhaps I can save you

some trouble," Sutcliffe interrupted. "You people don't have the coffin we agreed upon in stock, but you *just* happen to have a similar model for only a wee bit more money, et cetera, et cetera. Is that roughly how your little spiel goes? Well, you can forget it. I informed Mr. Kerabatsos—"

"That isn't what I wanted," Max interjected.

"—of Mrs. Helford's wishes in the matter, and—"

"Hey!" Max said sharply.

Sutcliffe broke off, startled.

"I didn't come about a coffin," Max said. "I don't give a damn what you bury the guy in and you obviously don't either, since just one of those dogs outside probably cost more than you paid the Greek for the whole package."

"What is it you want then?" Sutcliffe said stiffly, a rose flush of irritation creeping above his collar.

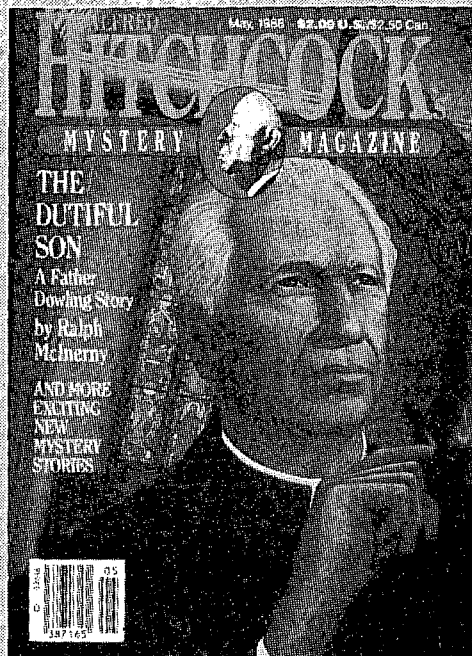
"I—look, I take it Bronfman worked for you or something. Do you know if he has any other family?"

"None that I'm aware of," Sutcliffe snapped. "Why?"

"I just wanted to ask." Max took a deep breath. "I was wondering if he had any brothers? A twin brother or something?"

"Why should Mr. Bronfman's relatives be any concern of yours?"

"It's a little complicated. Are



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you sure he didn't—"

Sutcliffe rose slowly from behind the desk, his eyes narrowing. "I repeat," he said coldly, "Mr. Bronfman had no family that I'm aware of, twin or otherwise, and we check the backgrounds of our employees very thoroughly. See here, I don't know what you think you're playing at, Maxwell, but you've picked the wrong party to meddle with. This interview is concluded and if you are not off the grounds in five minutes, I'll have Lee set the dogs on you. Now, was there anything *else*?"

"Ah, no," Max said. "I think that covers it."

"**T**he smarmy bastard got me fired," Max said, sipping his vodka/rocks. "Called up Kerabatsos and rained all over him, and when I stopped for my check the Greek came down on me like World War III."

"Helluva shame," Flynn nodded, polishing a brandy snifter with a towel while keeping a weather eye on the two drunks arguing sports at the end of the bar. "So whaddya gonna do now, Max?"

"Ahh, no big deal," Max said bleakly, "I've been canned by a lot better places than the Greek's. You know what he wanted me to do once?"

"No, and I don't wanna know,"

Flynn said, paling. "I've told ya not to talk shop in here, Max, rooms my lunch. Hey, you clowns cool it, okay?"

Flynn waddled off to separate the two rummies who'd escalated from name-calling to push-and-shove. Max knocked back the last of the vodka and pushed the empty glass forward for a refill.

"Mr. Maxwell?"

Max swung slowly around on his stool. Another familiar face, but not from fifteen years ago. The Oriental dog handler from the Helford mansion. Mr. ... Lee?

"Sorry to bother you," Lee said softly, "Mr. Carbasso gave me your address and your —ladyfriend say you're probably here."

"So I am," Max said.

"She also said you should not come back. Evah again."

"Terrific," Max said. "You know, this isn't turning out to be a day I'll wanna relive during my golden years. Still, no fault of yours, Mr. Lee, sit down. Can I buy you a drink?"

"No drink," Lee said, "you come with me. Mrs. Helford want to talk with you."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Helford. Lady I work for. Lady who own house."

"Why does she want to see me? You running low on dog food?"

"She don't tell me," Lee said.

"She just say to bring you."

"Did she say anything about Bronfman?" Max asked, sobering a little.

"No. Mr. Bronfman dead. You come?"

Max eyed Lee a moment, trying to read him. Nothing. It wasn't that Lee was inscrutable. Max just couldn't manage to bring the little guy's face into focus. "What the hell," he shrugged, "why not?"

"Mr. Maxwell, wake up. Come on, wake up."

Max grunted, and managed to open his eyes. He was piled in the back seat of a Rolls Royce stretch limo, and Lee was shaking him, none too gently. "Okay, okay already. I'm awake."

Max eased out of the Rolls, nearly toppling over as an icy gust caught him. Darkness had fallen, taking the temperature with it, and the wind off Lake St. Clair was bitter. He glanced around, only half awake, trying to get his bearings. He was in front of the Helford mansion, and not altogether sure what he was doing there.

"Come on," Lee said, taking him firmly by the arm, guiding him up the concrete ramp to the front door, "we go now."

groggily, as Lee led him along, their footsteps echoing hollowly on the gleaming tiled floor. Sculpture, incomprehensibly modern, each in its own setting, paintings hung at regular intervals, the mansion had more art in it than a M.O.M.A. rummage sale. He tried to keep track of where they were going, but lost his sense of direction after a couple of turns. And then he heard voices ahead, arguing, and recognized Sutcliffe's baritone bark. Terrific.

Lee paused in front of an exquisitely carved door and listened for a moment, shaking his head. Then he rapped twice sharply. Sutcliffe broke off in mid-tirade. Lee opened the door, nudged Maxwell through it, and abandoned him, closing the door softly as he left.

The room might have been a sun room in daylight. It was sparsely furnished in oak and canvas, Scandinavian Moderne, and its tinted glass walls offered a stunning view of the mercury-lit grounds. Sutcliffe was standing in the center of the room at parade rest, his hands clasped firmly behind his back. He was dressed almost formally, in an immaculate dark suit and regimental tie. The woman beside him was seated in a wheelchair. Max guessed her to be mid-fiftyish, and while it was apparent from the pallor of her skin and the dark

The entrance hall was in shadow, and seemed to be several miles long. A museum, Max thought

smudges under her eyes that her health was frail, nonetheless she was a striking figure. Ebon hair dusted with silver, fine boned patrician features, alabaster skin, eyes large and dark as a mystery. She was wearing a black suede blouse and slacks, and calfskin boots. An intricately embroidered shawl was draped loosely across her lap. It didn't quite camouflage her withered legs.

"Mrs. Charlotte Helford," Sutcliffe said dourly, not bothering to conceal his distaste. "This is—Mr. Maxwell."

"Ma'am," Max nodded, swaying slightly. The woman eyed him with impersonal curiosity, but said nothing.

"Mr. Maxwell, Mrs. Helford feels that I may have ah, overreacted this afternoon," Sutcliffe said. "I understand that you've lost your job because of it. I apologize for that, it was not my intention."

"Wasn't it?" Max said mildly. "Gee, you sure fooled the Greek."

"Well, perhaps it was," Sutcliffe said, flushing, "but the strain of Mr. Bronfman's passing—"

"Turned you into a basket case, right," Max interrupted. "Look, Mr. Sutcliffe, I've already invested a fair amount of my severance pay in a perfectly good bender and I'd hate to see it go to waste, so can you cut

the smoke and get down to it?"

"As you wish," Sutcliffe said stiffly. "Mrs. Helford feels that we may have done you an injustice, inadvertently you understand, and she wishes to put it right."

"I see," Max said. "And just how right does she wish to put it?"

"We thought compensation in the area of five thousand dollars would be equitable."

"Five—thousand?" Max blinked. "In ah, in return for what?"

"Nothing, really, an agreement absolving us of legal liability, in effect, putting the matter behind us. Permanently."

Max glanced from Sutcliffe to the woman, then back again, "I'll be damned," he said softly.

"I might point out," Sutcliffe continued, "that if you choose not to accept our offer, which, by the way, I feel is more than generous, we have the financial resources to—"

"I learned my trade in Vietnam," Max interrupted.

"I beg your pardon?" Sutcliffe said.

"I worked in a funeral home when I was in high school, just sweeping up, you know? So when I got drafted in '69, I was assigned to graves registration, which in 'Nam meant chasing around the countryside in 6-bys

and cargo planes, bagging and I.D.ing bodies, and pieces of bodies, and—" He took a deep, ragged breath.

"I don't see how this is relevant—"

"Let me finish," Max said quietly. "The point is, after the things I saw there, I never thought I'd be afraid of anything again. Ever. But I was afraid last night, and all day long today. Afraid I was finally coming unglued, losing it. But I'm not, am I?"

"If you think you can get more money by—"

"I don't want your money, Sutcliffe. I've never cared much about money one way or the other. But you shouldn't have jerked my chain. I don't know what's going on out here, but something is. And since I'm temporarily between jobs, I may just pass the time by finding out what. Nice meeting you, Mrs. Helford. Sorry to abandon you in your hour of grief, but I've gotta get back to my guests." He turned toward the door.

"Not so fast, you two-penny ponce," Sutcliffe snarled, grabbing Max's arm, spinning him around. "Who the hell—"

Max jerked free harder than he'd intended, and caught Sutcliffe sharply across the bridge of the nose with his elbow. The older man stared at him a moment, stunned; then his knees

buckled and he sat down. Hard.

"Jesus," Max said, trying clumsily to help him up, "I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Bugger off, damn you," Sutcliffe mumbled, pushing Max away.

"I think you'd better leave, Mr. Maxwell," Mrs. Helford said quietly, her voice husky, dark velvet.

"Look, I'm sorry, really—"

"Get out!" she said.

"Right," Max said.

Easier said than done. Max made his way unsteadily down the hallway, trying to find the front door, expecting to hear the hounds of the Baskervilles in full cry with every step. No luck. The place was a maze of dead end passages, each with its own gallery. He tried a dozen different doors, giving the priceless displays of art and antiques no more than a glance before pushing hurriedly on to the next. He opened yet another door, glanced into the deserted room, and had the door half closed again before the scene registered. Bronfman. Edgar L. He opened the door slowly and stepped in.

The room was a den of sorts, with natural walnut paneling, a gun rack, and a well stocked bar against one wall, a large fieldstone fireplace with a gas log hissing in the grate, leather

easy chairs arranged facing the fire. A fully decorated Christmas tree in the corner flickered to life when Max flipped the light switch next to the door, and soft music filled the room. Nat King Cole. "Stardust."

Edgar L. Bronfman was hanging above the fireplace mantel, gazing calmly from a half-length portrait, much younger than when Max saw him last, early twenties perhaps. He was wearing a double-breasted gray suit, and perhaps the artist had idealized him a bit, but not much. In life, Bronfman had been a handsome man.

The portrait was surrounded by framed photographs, Bronfman as a teenager sitting behind the wheel of a vintage Caddy convertible, Bronfman on horseback in polo gear, and as a bridegroom standing at the altar with a heartbreakingly young and lovely Charlotte Helford beside him. Max lingered over that one a moment, mentally comparing the girl in the white silk wedding dress with the woman in the chrome and leather wheelchair. He shook his head slowly. Life and time. Damn them to hell.

The picture beside it was of Bronfman in uniform, U.S.A.F. blue, complete with silver wings on his chest and silver bars on his shoulders. The frame below held only a medal, with a brief

citation beneath it. Silver Star, Posthumous, awarded to First Lieutenant Jason Helford; U.S.A.F., for gallantry in action—Max skipped over the rest, until the date of the award caught his eye, Inchon, Korea, 15 October 1950. The date seemed to waver, and fade out for a moment, and then flick back into place, in cold black and white. October, 1950. He stared at it for a moment, dazed, then examined the photograph more closely, reading the nametag below the wings. Helford. Not Bronfman. And the man in the portrait was dead before Max was born.

A low, rumbling snarl sounded from behind him. Max turned slowly. One of the Dobermans had slipped into the den through the open door. It was advancing on him cautiously, teeth bared, eyes glowing with the light of combat, growling deep in its chest. Max glanced around frantically for a weapon, anything, but there was nothing within reach. He began sliding cautiously toward the gun rack in the corner . . . The dog planted its paws, preparing to spring.

"Hanover!" Charlotte Helford said sharply from the doorway. "*Nicht! Halten!*" The Doberman froze in place, still poised to attack. Mrs. Helford hummed into the room in her

wheelchair, her face livid, a study in barely controlled fury. "What are you doing in here?"

"I ah, I got lost," Max said, swallowing. "I couldn't find my way out."

"Lost?"

"Hey, it's not like you've got street signs posted in here," Max said. "Look, would you mind calling off your dog, please? I wasn't going to steal anything."

"Weren't you? Perhaps not, but you're still a dangerous man, Mr. Maxwell, Sutcliffe can attest to that."

"Come on, lady, you know that was an accident. He shouldn't have grabbed—dammit, will you call off the dog?"

"Don't worry about the dog, Maxwell. You're safe enough, for the moment. How much do you want?"

"How m—? What are you talking about?" Max said. "How much for what?"

"Don't play games with me, Maxwell. Money is what you really came for, isn't it? So what's your price? How much to forget what you've seen?"

"Mrs. Helford," Max said carefully, "I'm not sure what I have seen, or what it means. But one thing I do know, you haven't got enough money to make me forget it. At least not until I understand it."

She stared at him, hard, her

gaze as intense and unwavering as the dog's. "You really don't know, do you," she said at last. "Eddie didn't tell you."

"Eddie? You mean Bronfman? No, he didn't tell me anything. He was dead when I met him. Both times."

"Both—? I don't understand."

"Mrs. Helford," Max said, taking a deep breath, "last night I embalmed Mr. Bronfman. But not for the first time. I'm fairly certain I worked on him once before. In July, 1972. Only his name wasn't Bronfman then, and it wasn't Helford either," he added, jerking a thumb at the painting over the fireplace. "It was Connolly, or Connery. Something like that."

"I—see," she said slowly, nodding in comprehension. "Sutcliffe is convinced you were one of Eddie's—playmates, but I should have known better. You're not his type. Very well, Mr. Maxwell, under the circumstances perhaps we can work something out, though you should bear in mind your bargaining position isn't strong."

"I'm not following you at all."

"And perhaps you won't be able to follow me, as you put it. How much do you understand about art, for instance?"

"Not much," Max admitted, "but enough to know that you must have a couple of million

bucks' worth sitting around out here."

"Not correct. The art that I *own* is worth—more than I'd care to discuss, but the art on display in my home is worth only a few hundred thousand, Mr. Maxwell. The sculpture, the paintings are only reproductions, excellent ones but copies nonetheless. The originals are much too valuable to be kept anywhere but a vault. Now do you understand, Mr. Maxwell?"

"I'm—not sure. What are you saying? That the man—men—I worked on were clones or something?"

"Actors, Mr. Maxwell, of a suitable physical type, willing to undergo minor cosmetic surgery in return for salary and benefits totaling roughly a hundred thousand a year, for three years. Sutcliffe recruits them in Los Angeles. Acting is a precarious profession. We have no problem finding volunteers."

"You're right out of your tree, you know that?"

"So I've been told," she said coolly, unoffended. "Morbid obsession is the clinical term. I even put up with analysis for a while. Until I realized I was throwing away perfectly good money to rid myself of one of the few sources of pleasure left open to me. I decided it would be more satisfying to enjoy

my obsession than to cure it."

"And what happens to these—actors? When their contracts are up, I mean?"

"They're—remodeled, and move on to other things, with a substantial income guaranteed as long as they remain discreet."

"And what about Bronfman? And the other one? Were they indiscreet?"

"Indiscreet?"

"All right, I'll spell it out. How is it that two of your—'reproductions' wound up dead, Mrs. Helford?"

"Two?" she said, arching her eyebrows. "Actually there have been three, over the years. You see, the kind of person who's willing to—take on a job like this tends to be a bit unstable emotionally, I'm afraid. Sutcliffe does his best to screen them, but..." She shrugged. "Eddie Bronfman had a drug habit. Cocaine, I believe, and Tim Kennelly mixed drinking and driving once too often. I was especially sorry to lose Tim. Drunk or sober, he was good company."

"I... see."

"I doubt it," she said. "I know what you're thinking, Mr. Maxwell, it shows. But spare me your contempt. I had a good life once, until war and polio took it away. I've salvaged what I could from the wreckage, and

I live as I choose. Is your own life so much better?"

"No," Max admitted, "I guess not. You may live in a glass house here, Mrs. Helford, but I'm in no position to throw stones."

"Fair enough. Which brings us to you, Mr. Maxwell. I value my privacy. I'm willing to pay to protect it. Can we reach an understanding, do you think?" She casually patted the Doberman. Its gaze never wavered from Max's throat.

"You don't have to buy me, Mrs. Helford," Max said, eyeing the dog. "In my business, discretion comes with the territory. Besides, who would I tell? My clients?"

"I'd *prefer* to have a financial arrangement. One that's legal and binding, if you know what I mean. Don't worry about the money, Mr. Maxwell, I can afford it."

"All right," Max shrugged, "if that's what you want. But it's really not necessary."

"Trust me, Mr. Maxwell, it's necessary, if not now, then later. Come back tomorrow, if it's convenient for you, and talk to Mr. Sutcliffe. You'll find him quite a reasonable man when you don't knock him about." She touched the joystick on the arm of her wheelchair, swiveling it slowly around. "Lee will see you home. I ah . . ."

"Is something wrong?" She was staring past him, and he glanced over his shoulder, following her gaze. She was frowning at the portrait over the fireplace, her eyes flicking back and forth between Jason Helford's face and his own. He met her gaze, and felt the full force of its hungry intensity.

"You know," she said, "physically you're very near—"

"No," he said softly, shaking his head, "not a chance."

"Are you quite sure? The financial arrangements—"

"I'm sure," he interrupted, gently cutting her off. "The past is like . . . New York City. It's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there."

"Wouldn't you?" she said, her eyes holding him effortlessly, scanning his soul like a second-hand magazine. "Wouldn't you really? Well. Perhaps not. Lee will be along directly, Mr. Maxwell. But ah, don't be too hasty. Sleep on the—idea. You can give Sutcliffe your answer tomorrow. *Raus*, Hanover." The chair hummed her out of the room, the dog trotting obediently after.

And then he was alone again, with Nat King Cole and Jason Helford. Max helped himself to a snifter of brandy from a decanter on the bar, glancing around the room as he poured, absorbing its ambience, its ex-

cellence, then eased himself into one of the overstuffed chairs facing the fireplace. And Jason Helford's portrait. A handsome man, Jason, no doubt about it.

He rolled the brandy around on his palate, savoring its smoky

aroma, feeling its warmth glide gently down the back of his throat, the soft, slow-motion explosion in the pit of his stomach. The chair was leather, real leather, and comfortable. Very comfortable indeed.

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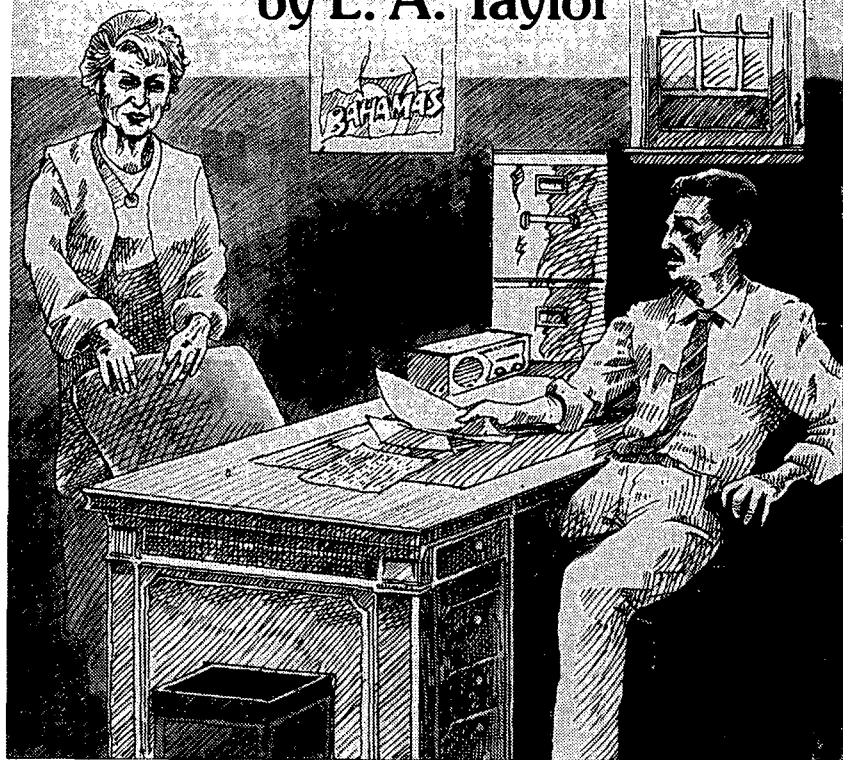
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FICTION

The Moebius Trick

by L. A. Taylor



Lance Rockhard, private investigator, stood at his second floor window with his hands in his front trousers pockets. The sun was bright and his gut was tight and he sneered at the dingy street be-

low with his keen brain working at top speed on a problem of intense personal interest.

"Ah, hell," he said.

He crossed his dingy front room with his shoulders squared and sat in his oval swivel chair

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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behind the desk scarred by cigarette burns along the near edge. His eyes were still narrowed as he tried to decide what to do about that two-timing woman and the jerk she'd stepped out with. Time was, Lance Rockhard had thought Violet was his girl alone. No more.

A very gentle tap sounded on the door.

"Come in," he growled.

A mousy dame about fifty years old timidly poked her head around the edge of the door. She smiled—something funny about that smile, he thought fleetingly—and stepped into his office. "Oh," she said. "How wonderful! It's exactly as I pictured it."

"Huh?" said Lance Rockhard.

"Yes, there are the cigarette burns . . . and that green carpet, I had the exact shade, very good . . . yes, dust on the window glass. Too bad about that crooked letter in your sign—I always regretted that. Well." The mousy dame, somebody's grandma, smiled at him. "And you're Lance."

"Lance Rockhard, Private Investigator, at your service," he said. "No case too small, no—"

"—problem too big," the dame finished with him. "Oh, such a nice, deep voice! Just as I thought. I'm sure I did the right thing, coming here, now."

What the hell is with this woman? Lance wondered. She stepped cautiously across the floor, as if it might give way under her, and went to the door behind the desk.

"Hey," Lance protested. "You can't—"

But she had. "And you don't make your bed, and you haven't cleaned that coffee maker in at least three months, and just look at that pile of dishes," the woman said happily. "But you didn't tell me about that poster, Lance. I didn't know you liked the Bahamas."

"Er, ah, a little color—who the hell are you?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Ms. Mouse turned around and offered him a pudgy hand. "I forgot you wouldn't know me. I'm Amanda Bertilhelmer—Jeannette White, that is. Your author."

"My author?"

"Yes, dear, I write your books." She frowned through the door into his lair. "I really didn't know about that poster," she said, sounding distressed.

"I only put it up this morning," Lance said.

"Oh, this morning, yes. That explains it."

"No, it doesn't. What the hell are you talking about? My books? That you write? What books?"

Ms. Mouse developed a flustered air. "I made you up," she

said. "That is, I made up your adventures, and you sort of grew in my head—I mean, you know, *The Adventure of the Silken Scarf* was the first one, then there was, let me see, I think it was *The Crassula Plant*—"

"I still don't get you." Some-time during this exchange Lance Rockhard had stood up. Now he sat down.

"Oh, yes, of course, those were my titles. The publisher called them, um, *The Ruby-Throated Corpse*—because of the hummingbird, remember? And *Jade Green*, *Blood Red* was the next one, and—"

"Wait-wait-wait," Lance said. "Hold on." He frowned at Ms. Mouse. Silk scarf . . . hummingbird . . . yeah. His first big case. Gawd, twelve years ago! Red silk scarf around the bimbo's throat, only the red was from blood, and the hummingbird showing up where the feeder used to be had tipped him off . . . and a couple of years later, the guy who croaked all over the greenery in the bay window of his townhouse . . . "You better explain," he said. "You walk in here like you've seen it all before, though I sure as hell never saw you before, and then you start talking about a couple of murders I solved a few years back, and—"

"But I told you," Ms. Mouse

said. She had muddy grey-blue eyes in a round face, and she opened them round. "I'm your author. I write the books you live in."

"You're telling me I'm fiction?"

She nodded.

"Aw, c'mon. What's your kink here, anyhow?"

"I made you up," she said patiently. "Your office. You. That pair of pants you've got on. You had to have the back seam re-sewn after your last adventure, remember? I put that in because I split my own the day I wrote that, only squatting down to pet the cat, I fear." Lance's hair began to rise. "All but the poster," Ms. Mouse continued. "I hadn't known about that, yet, though I remember seeing it in a store window now. In my own life, I mean."

While she blathered about the poster, Lance thought fast. Crazy lady, but he might just be able to use her. "Hey, you know about Violet?" he asked.

Ms. Mouse studied her sensible shoes. She blushed. "I'm sorry about that. Nick came along, and it just sort of happened. I don't know why."

"That's what *she* said," Lance said. He clenched his jaw briefly. "What I want to know is, can you undo that? Make it like what's-his-face never showed up?" The rock was still in the

sock, wasn't it? he thought. Dumped in the bottom drawer after last week's fracas? Yeah. Socks don't take fingerprints.

"Oh, no, no," Ms. Mouse was saying. "No, I'm afraid I can't do that. It wouldn't be quite honest, now, would it?"

"Who's talking honest? I want Violet back. Now. With the nerd out of the picture."

"I can't do that." She looked truly sorry. "See, she's a character, too. I have to write what she tells me to write. Otherwise she'll turn into a very flat sort of being, and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

No way. Violet wouldn't be Violet if she didn't fill those D-cups right to the brim. Curiosity got the better of Lance Rockhard. "Hey," he said. "If you're my author, how come you're sitting here talking to me? How come you're not sitting at a typewriter somewhere making talkie-pitchie in your head?"

"I had to come in," Ms. Mouse explained, earnestly and without making the slightest sense. "Lance, dear, I need your help. I'm in a bad mess just now myself, and I think you're the one who can save me."

This, now, he could understand. And until he could get the dame over to Violet's place, he could play this role. "I get a deposit on my fee," he said. "The charge—"

"Yes, yes," Ms. Mouse interrupted. "I know all about that. I invented it. Hundred a day and expenses." She handed over two fifty dollar bills. "This won't take long."

She told him about the Moebius trick. "Do you know what a Moebius strip is?" When he shook his head, she explained: "If you take a strip of paper, and glue the ends together to make a circle, but *first* turn one end over, you get a circle of paper with a little twist in it. What's odd about it is that it's now all one surface. You can take a pencil and draw a line down the middle of the strip and when you come back to where you started, the line will be on both sides of the paper—it's really one side. And if you cut along the line, you don't end up with two circles, you end up with one. Authors and their characters are like that, in a way. I came along the line into your side, and here I am." She smiled at him as if she had just revealed the hook for one of the classier con games going. Maybe she had, but he had a few tricks up his own sleeve, and they didn't need any paper strips.

"What do you mean, you came along the line?" he asked.

She told him. "See?" she said, and vanished. She reappeared. "See?" she said.

"Hey, that's a good one," Lance

said, rapidly adjusting his plans. "You think I could do that?"

Ms. Mouse leaned forward. "I want you to," she said intensely. "There's a man who has threatened my life. He's coming to my house at five this evening. You're the strongest, most intimidating man I can imagine, and I want you to be there to open the door."

"Just open the door?"

"And sock him one. But then you come straight back here, and no one will ever know, you see? It's perfectly safe. You can't get charged with assault. But you'll have to be fast. It's very, very hard to keep both of us in the same world at once, and you haven't had the practice I've had."

For a hundred bucks? "Sure," Lance said, engaging his own rapidly hatched plan. "But first, why don't you and I take a walk? Violet might not want to see me, but I know for a fact she'd be purple if she missed seeing you."

"Oh, what a lovely idea!" Ms. Mouse said, her eyes lighting. "You really are a dear boy under all that muscle, aren't you! I'd love to meet Violet." She flushed again, not as deeply as before. "But, um, Lance, could I use your bathroom before we go? I promise not to say a word about the way it looks."

"Sure, go ahead," Lance

said, scarcely believing his luck. While the crazy dame was gone, he stuffed the cash in his pocket and grinned at grinning fate.

Nick the Nerd opened the apartment door, protecting Violet, just as Lance had known he would. Without a word, he took the stone out of his pocket and swung it by the knotted end of the sock to crack the lousy jerk's skull. He heard a muffled squeak from Ms. Mouse as he hit the guy a few more times to make sure.

Dead as a doornail. "Here, you hold this," he said, handing Ms. Mouse the sock, and ran down the stairs while Violet was still calling, "Nick? Nick? Who was that?"

He made a block and ducked down an alley for insurance before he tried the Moebius trick, eyes screwed shut.

Cops. He knew the smell before he even opened his eyes. When he did, he found himself in the Fourth Street police station, down to the last smudgy detail. But the guys weren't the guys he knew—some beefy blond was manning the desk instead of his pal Buster Pannin, and standing looking at the duty roster was some black patrolman he'd never set eyes on before. Behind the desk a

lieutenant he'd swear hadn't been on the force yesterday was talking to half a dozen TV cameras.

"Hey!" somebody yelled, from the holding cells. "Cop! Get back here! That axe lady's gone!"

"Bertilhelmer's escaped?" the blond at the desk gasped.

"Who's Bertilhelmer?" Lance asked the patrolman.

"Man, where you been? That's Jeannette White, that mystery writer, the one took an axe to her boyfriend this morning. We've had her here half an hour." The cop showed a row of glossy teeth like old piano keys. "Now we're looking for the other guy."

Other guy? "Ah, what was her boyfriend's name, can you tell me?" Lance asked.

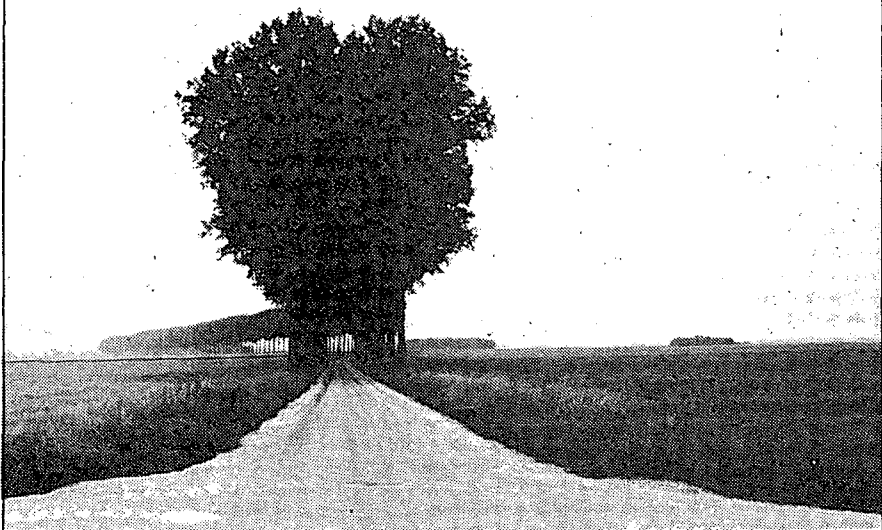
"You won't be a reporter long," the cop sneered. "Everybody in town knows Nick White, on Channel Six weather."

Nick? Jeez, knowing her, she'd set him up somehow. The Moe-bius trick. He'd have to use it sooner than he'd planned. Lance closed his eyes and caught himself just in time. He couldn't go back. He was stuck here in her version of his city. No job. No identity. No Violet.

Bécause Ms. Mouse hadn't gone bleating off to the cops with the sock in her hand to get herself arrested for murder as a random lunatic, the way he'd thought she would. She'd just smiled a little, dropped the sock, and quietly walked away while Violet stood over Nick the Nerd and screamed. Nobody would blame her for anything. Nobody would know she existed, not in his half of this crazy city. She had him, all right. Step back there, and he might as well walk into that empty holding cell. He could hear a little whisper inside his left ear, a mousy little voice saying, *You never were as bright as you thought you were, dear*. What had she said about they couldn't stay in the same world? Conned, all right.

He could see that last scene, if he did try to go back. Him sticking his key in his brand-new deadbolt lock. Him opening the door of his walk-up office. Her sitting behind the desk with the cigarette burns, with the .45 she'd taken out of the bottom drawer leveled right at his heart. Either way, she was safe for good. He had a weird urge to write it all down.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

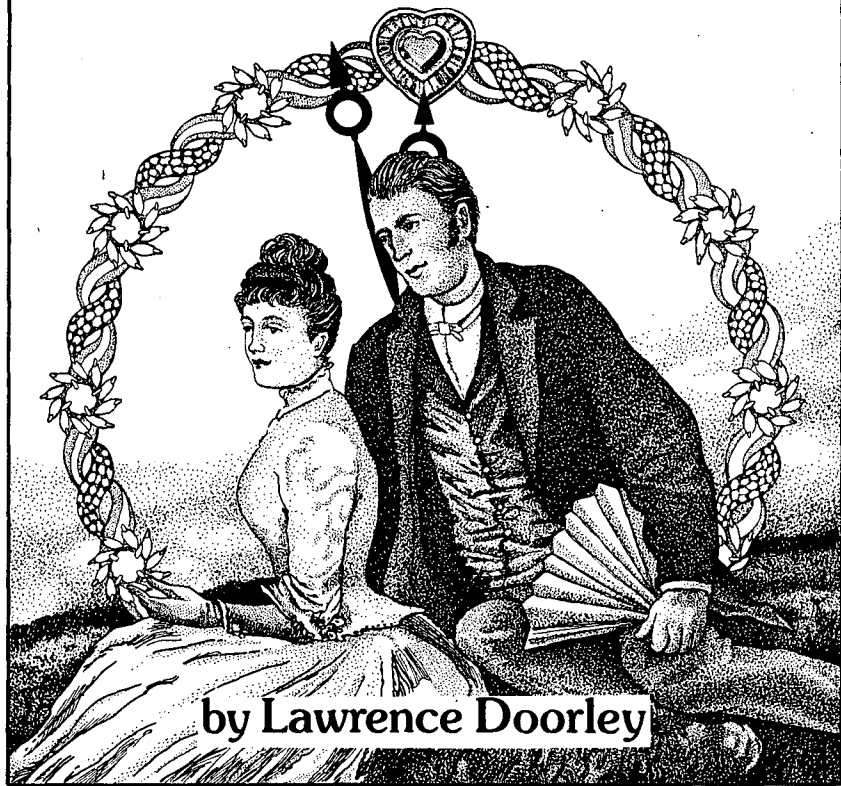


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An orderly retreat. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

Mrs. Ralston's Old Flame, a Yale Man



by Lawrence Doorley

Mr. Ralston buried Mrs. Ralston's Old Flame, the Yale Man, under cover of darkness in a far corner of the unkempt county home graveyard on a cold, rainy night in October, 1932. Bill, Mr. Ralston's younger brother, helped. In fact he drove the small truck with the coffin in back, covered by a canvas. And he helped Mr. Ralston lower the coffin into the grave. After that they went away in a hurry, leaving the two poor feeble-minded

Illustration by Kurt Wallace

county home inmates to finish up. Mumbling to themselves, bewildered at having to bury one of their own in the dark of night, the poor old chaps managed to get all the dirt shoveled in with reasonable dispatch, considering that one, Herman, had a bad back and the other, Alfred, had bursitis in both elbows.

Still, it was easier than digging the grave, a task which had befallen them the previous week, it being standard practice at the county home to stay a grave or two ahead, old men dying at a good clip at the home (there were no women at the home, back then women were out of luck). Being less than normal in several ways it, of course, never dawned on the poor chaps that they were burying someone other than a fellow inmate.

Back then Mr. Ralston was an important person in the county—though with the Depression his importance was beginning to wane—and the authorities all cooperated; the county home administrator, the sheriff, the prothonotary, the coroner, the latter having no hesitation at all in signing "Accidental Death" on the death certificate (why not, it was true), everyone sworn to secrecy, Mrs. Ralston never to find out.

You could get away with something like that, keep it out of the paper, circumvent the prothonotary's department (as chief clerk he kept records of births, deaths), in that part of southwestern Pennsylvania if you were a prominent coal mining superintendent for The Company (Klondike Coal and Coke, headquartered in Pittsburgh) with a bundle of money to pass around at election time. Of course things changed when Roosevelt and the Democrats took over in March, 1933. But that's not part of the story.

When the federal government did take over the welfare system (it was called "relief" back then) under Roosevelt (women were included), the county home closed and it stood empty and forbidding, a massive, four story red brick fortress on a little knoll on a side road just outside the city limits of Manorsville, the county seat. The building, the thirty acres which had produced vegetables, fruits, milk, chickens, and eggs, and of course the graveyard—the whole place soon became an eyesore. Windows were broken in the main building, the porches soon fell in, weeds flourished. People tore the chicken coops apart for the lumber; vandals pulled the wooden crosses from the graves. Finally the apple trees, the peach trees, the cherry trees stopped producing, became gaunt and gnarled, a pathetic sight for oldtimers who remembered how beautiful they used to appear in their springtime glory. The whole place was a disgrace.

Over the years many an irate citizen wrote to the editor of the local paper, blaming the county commissioners for not doing something about the county home. Why not try to sell the place, thereby bringing in some money, instead of just allowing it to sit idle, a disgrace to the whole county?

Every single county commissioner from the late 1930's up until the 1980's agreed that it was a great idea. Unfortunately no one wanted to buy the place, that is until a mall developer from Pittsburgh made the county an offer in 1984. The offer was accepted with alacrity.

Life, as numerous philosophers have stated, is fraught with uncertainty, the unpredictable is the norm. Still one would hesitate to predict an unpredictable as incongruous as a Yale man buried in a potter's field, in a county home graveyard. Yale men do not end up like that.

Even more unlikely, once interred, who could possibly have predicted that the Yale man would reemerge from his far corner of the county home graveyard and create quite a stir. (Harvard men thus far along in this melancholy tale are probably smiling smugly to themselves, thinking what can you expect from a Yale man? For shame.)

Good, great news, well done, was the verdict when it came out in the paper that the county home acreage had been sold for two million dollars and that a mall—eighty stores were planned—was in the immediate offing. No protests were expected concerning the graveyard, none of the long-time occupants having any relatives to protest the desecration. Besides, the developer had agreed to very carefully dig up the pine boxes and rebury them on an old farm out in the country that the developer had purchased for that very purpose.

A wrecking crane came in, demolished the stout old red brick building in two weeks. Bulldozers, power shovels, backhoes came next, and the dirt flew in all directions. With all that modern equipment it was possible to dig up fifty to sixty coffins a day, load them onto trailers, take them out to the country where a power shovel and a backhoe had deep trenches all ready.

The Yale man turned up a good ten days after everyone thought all the bodies had been dug up and reburied, the total coming to 2187 long-forgotten nonentities. Nickie, a tall, tanned blond kid of about twenty-two, was operating a backhoe in a remote corner of the property when the teeth of the backhoe hooked onto some-

thing. The something proved to be a coffin, the backhoe having lifted the lid off as it raised the coffin out of the ground. Landing on a small mound of dirt, the coffin tilted in such a way that the corpse, fifty-two years of age . . . deterioration having taken place (it looked bad), began to slide from the center of the coffin toward the edge. It stopped just before it seemed certain it would tumble out, right in front of the backhoe.

His tan suddenly replaced by a chalk-white color, his heart beating fast, his mouth open, poor Nickie threw the machine into neutral, frantically pulled on the brake, and sat there thinking, Jesus, the foreman's gonna give me holy hell. As if I hain't got enough trouble, Ma always bellyachin' she needs false teeth . . . Jesus, why don't I ever have any luck. . . .

Then, sneaking a longer look, his eyes widening, he said out loud: "What the hell."

"Forget it, Nickie," the foreman told him ten minutes later, "it wasn't your fault this time. But, by God, you're right, sure as hell, this poor son of a bitch got hisself hit in the head with some sorta three pronged something. Christ, I'll have ta get ahold of the super. . . . Move your machine up ahead, Nickie, 'en keep goin' . . . and fer Christ sake quit your shakin'. You look like you're 'bout ready to faint. Hell, this poor son of a bitch's been dead fer God knows how long. He ain't gonna' hurt you. Git goin'."

"Yes . . . sir," said Nickie, jumping back on the machine.

When the sheriff's office was notified via a call from a phone booth that a corpse with three jagged cracks in its skull had been dug up at the county home, the sheriff, the coroner, four or five deputies went right out.

Early on, when he was on his way up—before he lost confidence and hung his head—Mr. Ralston used to tell the kids that "your mother has pulchritude." Someone looked up pulchritude in the big dictionary and found out that it meant beauty, grace, physical charm and the smaller kids would tease their mother, giggling, "Boy, mother, you sure have lots of pulchritudity."

In the early years that was cute, sweet, dear; the little imps. But later, still living out in the coal region, "stuck out in this filthy, dirty old mining town," quite a bit of the cuteness and the sweetness had evaporated and Mrs. Ralston, cheeks flushed, chin out, would snap, "A lot of good it's done me."

Then the older girls, also bitterly resenting the dirt, the smoke, the isolation, would feel sorry for their talented mother and say to one another, "Poor Mother, she should have married her old flame, the Yale man."

Poor Dad, the boys all said—it was four to four, the four girls for Mother, the four boys for Dad—Mother certainly makes things tough for Dad, always complaining when she actually has the world by the tail: her fur coat; Lacey, the wonderful woman who came in four days a week to do the laundry, help with the cooking; the Polish girls from the patch who did the housework; the charge accounts at the Pittsburgh department stores—all she had to do was phone, they delivered; the charge accounts in town; someone to chauffeur her around, beginning in 1921 when Mr. Ralston bought his first Studebaker.

Mrs. Ralston had been an O'Connell. There were four O'Connell girls. They all had pulchritude. But they lived out in "the region," the coal region, at Beatrice #1 (the mines were named for the wives of the rich Pittsburgh owners), where Pat O'Connell, a stout, red-faced Irishman who had come up the hard way, was superintendent. Being the super's daughters back then was somewhat akin to being royalty, and though the O'Connell girls attended the red brick schoolhouse—which The Company had built and donated to the county—and thus had made friends with the miners' children, the friendships began to deteriorate by the fifth grade when it was time to start parochial school, St. Mary's in Manorsville, six miles away by streetcar.

By the time the O'Connell girls graduated from high school at St. Mary's, they had no friends to speak of at Beatrice #1, and what few close friends they did have lived in Manorsville.

So after high school the girls moped around the big superintendent's house, Papa O'Connell absolutely refusing even to think of allowing them to work in town as so many of the town girls were doing. Well brought up Catholic young ladies did not expose themselves to "town ogles, to cigarettes and liquor, to all the temptations that lurk in big cities nowadays."

"But, Papa," the girls would protest, "Manorsville's no big city. There are only fifteen thousand people there. And we're all old enough to resist temptation. Please, Papa, let us work at Fieldstein's Department Store or at one of the insurance company offices, or at one of the banks . . . other girls are doing it."

"No. I have spoken. I don't want to hear another word about it."

That was that, there being no use to appeal to Mother O'Connell—a little bird-like creature in fear and awe of both Papa and God, it being a tie. All she could do was make another novena: please, God, let the girls find nice Catholic young men so they can marry and start raising a family, please, God.

While God was thinking it over, life went on: the smoke from the beehive coke ovens drifted up to the superintendent's house; coal-burning locomotives, pulling eighty or ninety coal cars, puffed past the house; dirt and soot and cinders descended in thick clouds.

For Pat O'Connell and Mary Alice Mahoney O'Connell, life in Beatrice #1, in the ten room superintendent's house with its electricity, indoor plumbing, hardwood floors, huge front porch, flowers, vegetable garden, was paradise, they each having come from dismal thatch-roofed cottages in poverty-stricken County Mayo. And there was the streetcar, which stopped within a hundred feet of the house. The girls used it to go to town three or four times a month, to shop, to attend a lecture, to take in a movie, and of course, every Sunday, they dressed in their Sunday best and took the streetcar to nine o'clock mass at St. Mary's.

And it was the novenas, together with the girls' trained voices, that eventually brought a happy end to the O'Connell girls' woeful lives. The girls all had lovely voices, trained voices—Mrs. Grothlestein, a large, capaciously bosomed, all-business, no-nonsense woman who had sung opera in Vienna, came out on the streetcar from town twice a month (Papa paid double her town rate) and taught the girls how to use their God-given voices. It paid off.

The girls sang in the choir at St. Mary's. They were so superior to the rest of the choir that Mrs. Kennedy, the choir director, gave the O'Connell girls the solo parts at regular high mass, at funeral masses; at weddings. And to hear one of those pure, clear, contralto voices ringing through the stilled church . . . Papa always sniffled and shed a tear. So did Mama, but she thanked God for having favored her girls.

In time an eligible Catholic man, usually approaching thirty, who had resisted the enticements of the city Catholic girls for one reason or another, would hear one of those spine-tingling voices and whisper hoarsely to a pew mate, a sister, a cousin, or, more often, his mother:

"Holy smoke, who's that?"

"Shhhhhh," he would be shushed, "it's one of the O'Connell girls from out in the region."

That took care of the eldest O'Connell girl, one down, three to go.

"Holy smoke, who's that?" a smitten, enthralled, eligible bachelor would whisper.

"Shhh . . . it's one of the O'Connell girls from out in the region."

Mother O'Connell thanked God for answering her novenas, the three girls married to fine Catholic men, all involved in the coal and coke business, which unfortunately—God wasn't perfect—took them from one dirty mining town to another. But they all lived on Tony Row, the three or four houses set off from the patch, the miners' houses, Tony Row being reserved for the superintendent, the company store manager, the mine foreman, the chief clerk. These houses all had electricity, indoor plumbing, screened front porches. Of course they couldn't entirely escape the smoke, the soot, the cinders. But, as Mother O'Connell often thought, the girls were very fortunate, married to fine men, starting their families, a bright future looming.

With three of the girls married, Mother O'Connell redoubled her efforts in behalf of the youngest, Grace Frances, one novena after another, the issue being the unfair advantage accruing to the Catholic town girls, in on the ground floor, able to snare the all too limited supply of eligible young men. Mother O'Connell wanted God to understand that she was not complaining . . . not for a moment . . . but she was beginning to . . . wilt away, out in the region, the poor dear girl.

Okay. . . . God loved those devout Irish novena makers. They were so confident, no matter how long it took, that their prayers would be answered. Let's see now: Grace Frances O'Connell.

God had a lot to work with in Grace O'Connell. She was a beauty, tall, slender, bosomy (back then you could be both slender and bosomy, it was the fashion). She had flaming red hair, a lovely complexion, big brown eyes, perfect teeth. But she had some liabilities. She had a haughty, aloof air about her, her shoulders straight, her back stiff, her chin out, characteristics that had frightened away several of the more timid of the already meagre availables, those shy souls eagerly snatched up by the Manorsville girls.

"You should tell your daughter to unbend now and then," Papa frequently reprimanded Mother. "She's too stiff, too formal, too . . . why you'd think she was Queen Victoria."

Mother O'Connell knew very well that Queen Victoria had been dead for years but she never talked back to Papa. Instead, in sit-

uations like this, she would, at the first opportunity, scurry upstairs to her own private corner of their bedroom, kneel on her priedieu, begin another novena.

A miracle, an incredible miracle occurred at Christmas 1907, The Company passing out bonuses to all twelve of its mine superintendents, the amounts based on production, safety, and how well the individual superintendent had warded off the continual threat of unionism.

Pat O'Connell's totally unexpected windfall—The Company had never done anything like this before—enabled him to buy a new washing machine for Beulah and also to surprise Mother with a genuine Turkish three piece parlor suite.

But he saved the best for Grace, a trip to The Springs, the famous resort in southern West Virginia, the summer playground of blue-bloods from Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York.

"The Springs, Papa, you're taking me with you to The Springs," exulted Grace, overwhelmed. "Oh, Papa, I've always dreamed of going there... the famous speakers... the orchestras... the magnificent surrounds... Oh, Papa, how wonderful. But... but... I have nothing to wear. I can't go down among all those high and mighty rich society girls in my... my... well Fieldstein's is... up to date for Manorsville but I'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"Not if I have anything to do with it," said Papa, smiling one of his blarney stone smiles. "You and Mother are going to Horne's in Pittsburgh... stay overnight... I want you to buy the very best summer clothes... ah... Grace... don't hug me... ah... what's for supper, Mother?"

Steak and potatoes, what else?

The annual coal convention was in session that June, 1908, at The Springs, and Pat O'Connell was in his element, introducing his beautiful daughter, she attired in the very latest summer resort fashions, to all of The Company's executives ("Holy smoke, Pat, she must have inherited her mother's looks, not yours") and to as many eligible looking young men as possible. Poor Grace, she was often embarrassed, but she was also so thrilled, so excited at the wonderful surroundings: the huge five story main building with its hundreds of windows, its wide verandahs, its white columns; the enormous number of flower beds, the tennis courts, the swimming pools, the lake with its rowboats

and canoes; the riding trails through the forested hills; the four restaurants—so thrilled that she excused dear Papa for going out of his way, time after time, to show her off to some likely looking young man.

The Yale man appeared on the second day, early in the afternoon, Grace, all in white—dress, hat, gloves, shoes—looking like a Philadelphia beauty, was standing on the sidelines eagerly watching an exciting polo match between the Meadow Brook High Flyers and the Sands Point Four, two of the East's better teams, engaged in an elimination contest to see who would play the Argentines in the fall. It was in the fifth chukker when the willow root polo ball caromed off the hoof of the wildly charging Excalibur (he was one of the all-time great polo ponies) and hit poor Grace in the left ankle.

"Ohhhhhh," she went—it hurt. "Oh . . ." But the pain quickly gave way to acute embarrassment as spectators crowded round and a well meaning old chap with a walrus mustache bellowed out, "Is there a doctor in the house?"

It is on such haphazard twists of fate that lives are changed. Had not the polo ball bounced off Excalibur's hoof, the Yale man would never have ended up in a potter's field in southwestern Pennsylvania, for he, the Yale man, realizing that his pony had diverted the ball into the crowd of spectators, signaled for play to stop and galloped over to the sideline, leaped from his horse, pushed through the crowd around Grace.

That evening Grace and her father were guests of thirty-two-year-old Devereux Strawbridge II, Yale '98, seven goal polo player for the Sands Point Four, heir to the Strawbridge Pitchfork and Shovel fortune. They dined in the Rhododendron Room, the most lavish, most expensive of the four restaurants. An orchestra played, there was dancing, six waiters attended each table. Papa kept the wine waiter busy; dear Papa, he was in his glory. Grace, the jealous eyes of all the smartly attired women in the room on her, was radiant, even though her ankle still throbbed. But so did her heart, Devereux devastatingly handsome—tanned, blond, charming—in his summer whites.

Following the exquisite dinner—boiled salmon, scallops and oysters, Virginia ham baked in cider, filet mignon with potatoes O'Brien—Papa raised his wine glass, twice, three times to all the O'Briens "back on the Old Sod, may they know better days"—following all that, Devereux, with Papa's cooperation, pre-

veiled upon a flushed (she too had a drink or two too many), enchanted Grace to dance the next waltz, her pleas that she would make a spectacle of herself, the ankle hindering, falling on deaf ears.

She danced four waltzes, Devereux supporting her in his strong arms, the ankle gradually forgotten, the June night, the music, the gorgeous surroundings, the gorgeous Yale man, all combining to lift her off her feet, send her floating out of this world, to paradise.

Later Papa blamed himself (of course he didn't admit it to Mother; she was to blame, "your daughter falling for a twice divorced agnostic"). He should have been more suspicious. Oh, he had learned that Strawbridge, although obviously wealthy and a perfect gentleman, had several severe drawbacks. He had looked the Yale man up at breakfast on the morning after the lavish dinner in the Rhododendron Room.

"You're a bachelor, I presume," Papa said, coming right to the point. .

"Yes, of course," Devereux had said.

"What about religion?" demanded Papa.

Here the Yale man was forthright. Looking Papa straight in the eye, he admitted to being "somewhat of an agnostic, but I am more than amenable to conversion. In fact I have no compunction whatsoever at becoming . . . ah . . . a genuine believer," he said with a charming, boyish grin, a seeming sincerity.

Agnostics were, of course, anathema to the O'Connells but still, remembering how bubbly, how radiant, how happy Grace had been—she had laughed as never before at some funny little saying of the Yale man—Papa thought to himself: Now there's a lot worthwhile here, bringing a wayward soul, a backslider, into the fold. Not only would it be vital for Grace but it would certainly stand Papa in good stead when the books were balanced Up Yonder.

So Pat didn't take Grace aside and tell her that he could not permit her to associate with an admitted agnostic. And she wouldn't have wanted to, no matter how much the boyish charm, the handsomeness, the rich background (he had admitted, modestly, to owning twenty-two polo ponies) enchanted her.

So Grace O'Connell had twelve divine, heavenly, oh, so wonderfully happy days at The Springs that June, 1908, the first day being involved in settling in, the last day in shock and tears, a heart broken, life ended, Devereux Strawbridge II turning out to be an unmitigated cad, preying on an unsophisticated Catholic

young lady from the coal region of southwestern Pennsylvania, the poor dear girl.

Papa learned of the perfidy while sitting at one of the bars late on the last evening, having two or three nightcaps. He had, after the dinner on the second night, stayed clear of the lovebirds, attending the various coal meetings ("Remember, the future of the whole industry, nay, of the whole U.S. industrial system, depends upon our maintaining unswerving vigilance against unionism"), playing poker, walking the grounds, smoking his expensive cigars, thinking if the old gang back in Balla Kiltimagh could see Patrick O'Connell now . . . it's a fine world, a fine world, next year it's Mother coming down with me, the poor woman.

A tanned young man took a stool next to Pat's.

"Say," said Pat, naturally garrulous, made doubly so by the last nightcap, "aren't you one of the teammates of . . . that Strawbridge fellow?"

"Why yes," the young chap said. "Do you know Dev?"

Here Pat, suddenly thinking that this was a chance to find out a little more about the fellow who was sweeping his daughter off her feet, said, "Not exactly, but he seems to be paying a lot of attention to . . . the daughter of . . . one of my associates, that young lady who was hit with the polo ball. Is . . . something in the offing there?"

The young man smiled.

"Who knows? The young lady in question, your, ah, associate's daughter . . . well, she is quite a bit different from Dev's usual . . . ah . . . well, old Dev usually prefers showgirls. He married two of them, and this young lady, Grace I think her name is, is not . . . I say, old chap, are you all right?"

"Ugggggg," Pat managed as he carefully eased off the stool, leaving behind a glass of beer spiked with whisky. "I'm . . . ah . . . all right . . . just . . . thanks for your . . . thank you."

Now what the hell got over him, thought the polo player as Pat staggered from the room. Pat spent a terrible night. Grace spent a divine night, dancing under the stars to the music of an orchestra from Philadelphia. It was after two in the morning when she got back to her room, next to Papa's.

Pat was up at six. Downed a hasty breakfast. Strode to the nearest house telephone at seven, phoned the Yale man's room and demanded he get down to the lobby right away.

Yes, it was true, Devereux admitted, he had been married twice.

To Follies girls. But the marriages hadn't worked out, each ending in divorce.

"I ought to horsewhip you," Papa snarled. "You told me you were a bachelor."

"Yes, I did, didn't I," he said, shaking his blond head. "At the time, Mr. O'Connell, I did not realize that I would become so . . . attached to your daughter, sir. I have been trying to get up the courage to tell . . . the whole truth, but having learned from Grace that . . . you are Catholics and knowing the Church's, ah, prohibition concerning marriage to a divorced person, well . . . I desperately wanted to prolong our . . . relationship—for as long as possible."

"That's no excuse," snapped Pat, clenching his fists. "You've been a cad, sir, a vile cad . . . romancing my little girl . . . get out of sight . . . I can't stand to look at you."

"I'm sorry, sir," the Yale man murmured, "I really am. I fell in love with Grace. I really did."

It took several weeks for the three married girls to find out from poor Mother ("Your daughter should have known better than to trust a slick-talking Yale man," Papa told her, after telling her the whole frightful story) what had gone wrong at The Springs. When they finally inveigled the heartbreaking story from their weeping mother ("Poor, poor Grace, she's heartbroken"), the girls felt quite a bit better, they having been indignant because Papa had taken Grace to The Springs when the only place any of them had gone was to Atlantic City once when they were little.

Summer passed at Beatrice #1. The leaves began to turn on the huge oak out front, on the apple trees out back. Grace O'Connell, pale and wan, barely eating, only leaving the house on Sundays to take the streetcar with Papa and Mother to nine o'clock mass at St. Mary's, continued to wilt, like the last rose of summer.

Then she turned thirty. And a birthday present, a lovely diamond bracelet, came from the Yale man. It was set in gold, the beautiful, gold-coated little box engraved with the name of a famous New York jeweler.

Papa was outraged. But, fuming inwardly, he managed to control himself because Grace, so sad, so listless—deep in the doldrums—suddenly came alive. She began singing in the bath.

Thank God, said Mrs. Kennedy, the choir director, the very next

Sunday, Grace O'Connell's divine voice, so faltering of late, suddenly the lovely, clear voice of the days before June.

"Holy smoke," murmured a stocky young man with strawberry blond hair, in the very last pew on the right-hand side. "What a lovely voice."

They were married in June, 1909, Grace Frances O'Connell, age thirty, and Joseph Michael Ralston, age thirty-three, recently arrived from the anthracite fields of Schuylkill County to become superintendent of one of The Company's smaller mines. Mr. Ralston, a handsome, somewhat shy man, was no Yale man. But starting in the mines at ten years of age he had worked his way up by hard work and by avidly pursuing a well-rounded education through the medium of the well respected International Correspondence School of Scranton, and had acquired diplomas in high school grammar, mathematics, drafting, blueprint reading, coal mine engineering, and was just beginning the six months' course in banking and finance when he married the talented, superior Grace O'Connell, a high school graduate. Too ashamed to tell his new bride that he had been forced to leave school in the fifth grade to help his father feed a large family, Mr. Ralston ceased his heretofore extraordinarily worthwhile association with the correspondence school.

The new groom first learned of the Yale man at the reception in the recreation hall at St. Mary's immediately following the wedding mass, one of Grace's married sisters inquiring archly if Grace had mentioned the Yale man yet.

"The Yale man," asked Mr. Ralston, overawed that he had married such a stunning young lady. "No . . . ah . . . should she have? Is there any reason that she should have?"

"Maybe, maybe not," said the nasty sister, mission accomplished.

Two months later, at the annual picnic of The Company at Locust Grove Park, Joe asked his father-in-law, Pat O'Connell, about the Yale man. Pat, well pleased that Grace had done so well ("They have their eye on him in Pittsburgh, Mother") and Joe, more in awe than ever, were sitting in the shade of a sycamore tree watching a couple of perspiring horseshoe pitchers battle it out.

"I've been meaning to ask you, Pat" (they were on a first name basis, at Pat's insistence), "about . . . well, one of Grace's sisters, at the reception . . . she said something about Grace and . . . a Yale man. What . . . did she mean?"

"Ah," snorted Pat, "I might've known. They're all jealous of Grace

for having gotten the best catch of all" (at which Joe squirmed in embarrassment). "Well, the Yale man. It's not a pretty story, Joe, not pretty at all. Anyway—hell, Joe, let's move around to the other side, the sun's shining through the leaves here. . . ."

They moved, settled back, Pat resumed.

"Well, last summer I took Grace to The Springs with me for the convention. . . . She, ah, there was a polo player there . . . name of Devereux Strawbridge . . . what about that for a monicker, Joe . . ." Joe smiled ruefully, wiped the perspiration from his forehead, Pat continued.

"He took a liking to Grace, they were together a lot . . . truth to tell, Joe, Grace kinda . . . well, she was . . . all the rich goings-on would turn any girl's head. She, damn it, she was taken by that . . . well, it was partly my fault, I shoulda been . . . Anyway on the next to the last day I found out that he was a divorced man . . . twice . . . had married Follies showgirls—what'a ya thinka that? Anyway he was also an . . . agnostic. . . . Well . . . damn it, it did upset Grace. That's the story, Joe. I'm glad to get it out."

"But was he really, I mean, did he graduate from Yale?"

"I guess so," admitted Pat. "At least that's what he told Grace and . . . well . . . he acted like one of those college types . . . if you get my meaning."

"I think I do," said Joe. "They're . . . pretty smooth . . . characters . . . most of them."

The years passed. By September, 1929, Joe Ralston—he was fifty-three—was superintendent of Catherine #1, The Company's largest operation in the coal region, with the ultimate promotion, the Pittsburgh office, a foregone conclusion, a year or two away at the most.

Pat O'Connell and his saintly wife had been dead for some years, sailing for heaven in good heart, leaving behind twenty-six grandchildren, eight of whom belonged to Joe and Grace Ralston. Things were going great, just great, for the Ralstons by September, 1929. They lived in the ten room superintendent's house on Tony Row. Grace had plenty of domestic help. And in addition to the company car, a '26 Chevy coach, the Ralstons had their own car, a 1928 seven passenger, straight-8, four door Marmon sedan. Grace had charge accounts in all the important stores in Manorsville plus the larger stores in Pittsburgh. Two of the children, a boy, a girl, were in college and six were attending St. Mary's, two in high school,

the others in grade school. All too frequently one, two, sometimes three or four, missed the eight o'clock streetcar and Grace would phone Joe on the company phone and poor Joe would have to phone down to the maintenance shop and tell Harry Phillips to get up to the house and drive the kids to town.

Grace was extravagant, so were the kids. But in spite of the substantial expenses required to keep the family in the style to which it had become accustomed, Joe, due to his yearly bonuses, had been able to invest in real estate in town and had also accumulated close to a hundred and fifty thousand dollars of paper profits in the New York stock market. For someone who had started as a breaker boy at age ten, picking slate twelve hours a day, deprived of a standard education, Joe Ralston had done extremely well.

Also, Joe had a pal, a confidante, his younger brother, Bill (Bill was forty-two in September, 1929), a debonair bachelor who had come west from the anthracite fields, the mines all closing, in 1922, and was now supply house clerk at Catherine #1. Both Joe and Bill, great sports enthusiasts, were having a fine time during the 1920's, the heyday of the sports hero. They had been at ringside in New York in September, 1923, when Jack Dempsey knocked out Luis Firpo, the Wild Bull of the Pampas, and had seen Notre Dame football games ever since the memorable victory over Army at the Polo Grounds in October, 1924, when the Four Horsemen rode to immortality on Grantland Rice's famous opening line, "Outlined across a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again today . . ."

And they managed to see two or three Pittsburgh Pirates baseball games every year. All in all Joe Ralston should have been sitting on top of the world. He wasn't. His wife Grace—fur coats, charge accounts, wonderful, fat Lacey doing the washing and the ironing, chubby blonde Polish girls from the patch to help with the housework, Harry Phillips to drive her to town, Mr. Hockley, the company store manager, constantly on the alert to dispatch two or three chickens, three pounds of sirloin, a dozen eggs, other items, all this and more—continually bewailed her lot.

"It's a dirty, filthy place," she complained constantly. "A terrible, awful place to raise a family."

And it was dirty, really dirty, incredibly dirty. For though Tony Row was situated at least a mile from the two hundred and sixty beehive coke ovens, the company engineers who designed the ovens

had failed to take into account the prevailing winds. And in addition to the ovens, the two hundred and sixty smoke-spewing little Vesuvia, there were four railroad tracks within a hundred feet of the front gate. One, the electrified Southwestern Penn Traction, was no problem, but the coal-burning locomotives of the P. R. R., the B & O, the Western Maryland, toiling upgrade, eighty or ninety coal cars behind, disgorged thick clouds of vile, smelly smoke and cinders.

Poor dear Lacey, she used to shed copious tears, unable to keep up with the dirty curtains, the cinders in the bedclothes, the smokestained drapes in the front parlor. And the Polish girls, cinders everywhere—it required a shovel and a bucket for the front porch, a broom was ridiculously inadequate; when no one was around they used bad words. Who could blame them?

Thus Grace's incessant, constant, never-ending jeremiads ("This filthy place, the girls out here in the wilderness, with no friends, the smoke worse every year, the cinders in the mashed potatoes, etc., etc., etc.") were one baneful intrusion in what should have been a pretty damn happy existence for Joe Ralston. The Yale man was the other bane, for inside the noteworthy and accomplished Joe Ralston there lurked a shy, self-effacing inner man still in awe of his pulchritudinous, confident, talented, outspoken wife. And he was always uneasy in the presence of the executives in the Pittsburgh office of The Company (he attended meetings there twice a year), many of them college graduates from Yale, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania.

Unfortunately—it didn't help things—Grace was aware of her husband's inadequacy in the backbone department.

"Your father would have been promoted long ago," she would tell the girls, "if only he had a little more backbone."

"Poor Mother," the girls would chorus, "forced to live in the filthy coal region all her life."

The Yale man had been a thorn in Joe's side ever since Grace's sister had brought him front and center on Joe and Grace's wedding day. Pat O'Connell had made light of the affair—he had described it as a brief little summer fling that Grace had soon gotten over. And Pat may have honestly believed that. But if it were true, why hadn't Grace returned the bracelet when she married Joe Ralston (it would have been easy to locate Devereux Strawbridge II, a prominent man-about-town in New York City)? Also, why had she worn it to a Knights of Columbus dance in Manorsville in 1912,

that being the first time Joe learned of the bracelet?

"Oh, Grace, I see you're wearing the Yale man's bracelet. My, isn't it lovely, Joe? It certainly looks mighty expensive," exclaimed one of Grace's sisters as the two couples met at the dance.

Grace turned pink, Joe turned pale, the witchy sister turned tail, dragging her husband behind her. Back home that night Joe displayed a commendable, understandable amount of backbone, demanding an explanation, right now, this moment.

Poor Grace explained haltingly, ashamed of having succumbed to the temptation to demonstrate to the town women that not all coal superintendent's wives did their jewelry shopping from the Sears Roebuck catalogue. And doubly ashamed for having humiliated her husband.

"So," said Joe when the long, labored explanation was finally finished, "it was a present from that, that polo player . . . the Yale man. Why didn't you send it back after we were married?"

"I should have," admitted Grace, beginning to bear up a little better now that the truth was out. "But I promise never to wear it again."

"If I ever see it again," vowed Joe, "I'll take a hammer to it."

There was a lot more space than usual between Joe and Grace in bed that night.

But it wasn't only the bracelet whereby the Yale man conducted what Joe came to regard as an insidious campaign to belittle him in Grace's eyes. ("Why would anyone do such a thing, Bill?" poor Joe asked his brother time after time. "Because he's a no-good son of a bitch," was Bill's explanation). For postcards, picture postcards, came year after year, sometimes two or three a year from "Dev." They came from faraway places, romantic places; from Egypt (Sunrise Over the Sphinx); from Spain (The Alhambra); from Paris (The Louvre); from London (Trafalgar Square); from Rome (The Colosseum); from the Hawaiian Islands (The Beach at Waikiki); from British East Africa ("On safari with the Prince of Wales, Dev."); and from the playgrounds of the rich in the U.S.: from Newport; from Southampton (Yachts in Their Slips); from Saratoga (The Race Track); and from . . . ("Be still my heart; dear memories, Dev.") The Springs.

Of course, the whole family—Lacey, too, and the Polish girls from the patch, plus the postmistresses of the little post office—everyone knew about Mrs. Ralston's old flame, the Yale man.

Joe would grit his teeth every time one of those picture postcards came. Most of the time he just gritted, said nothing, churning and seething within. Now and then the dam would burst and he accused Grace of "flaunting the cards to the children."

Naturally, something like that did nothing to soothe the troubled waters. Grace, back straight, chin up, outraged, denied flaunting, claiming the little ones liked to look at the pictures of faraway places. Poor Joe.

"Well, as I've told you time after time," brother Bill told him time after time, "if it were my wife I'd stop that son of a bitch in his tracks. And you could too, Joe, you could hire that New York private detective, the one you hired to see if our friend Dev really was a Yale grad. Hell, it took that private dick less than a day to prove that his nibs did graduate from Yale. You could hire him again, tell him to locate the stupid son of a bitch and warn him you were sick and tired and any more cards will mean trouble."

"I can't do that," Joe said, gloomily. "If Grace still wants to continue to receive them . . . after all, she could put a stop to it, it wouldn't be hard to get his address. No, Bill, I just have to let it take its course."

Early September, 1929, was the apex of Joe Ralston's life. It went downhill after that.

The Yale man appeared at the mine office around twilight of a cold, gray, rainy day in late October, 1932. He was driving a gleaming yellow 1928 Stutz Bearcat roadster.

Joe Ralston, fifty-seven now—balder, grayer, sadder—and brother Bill—forty-five, also balder, grayer, gloomier—the two old buddies were sitting in dismal mien woefully discussing the latest of the seemingly never-ending cruel blows, Notre Dame's upset loss to Pittsburgh the previous Saturday.

"Nothing has gone our way since September, 1929," Joe was saying.

"Yeah," was all Bill could say.

Nothing had gone right since that date. The stock market had crashed in October. It sank lower in 1930, even lower in 1931, finally wiping Joe out completely. ("I told you not to listen to those brokers, I told you not to buy Cities Service, but you wouldn't listen," Grace kept reminding broken-hearted Joe, two or three times a month.)

There was no smoke now, no soot, no cinders, the ovens banked

since early 1931, the steel mills in Pittsburgh working at only twenty percent of capacity and getting what little coke they needed from the by-product ovens in the Monongahela Valley. Oh, a train or two came upgrade a few times a week, but they carried about half the coal of former days and didn't seem to have any spirit, not belching, spewing, as in the old days.

Curtains lasted for three months, the mashed potatoes were free of cinders, a quick swish of the broom on the front porch did the job, and the roses didn't smudge one's nose now as they had in former days when smelled.

Of constant amazement around the gloomy mining town was the way wildflowers had begun to grow in the once scorched, parched earth windward of the ovens. There were Queen Anne's lace, dandelions, yarrows, daisies, even a few wild roses.

Birds had begun nesting in the ovens. So had humans. A dozen or so hoboes had taken up permanent quarters in separate ovens (each oven was about the size of a small circular pantry) as had whole families, a practice frowned upon by The Company. Strict orders had gone out from Pittsburgh to each superintendent to summarily evict any such trespassers, call in the sheriff if necessary.

"You aren't going to do it, are you, Joe?" Grace asked one night after supper, the two preparing for bed.

"No, I can't . . . where could they go? I've told Bill to get down there every day and tell them not to be too conspicuous. The poor souls have been hanging their washing in front on poles, and, of course, their cooking fires . . . the smoke comes out of the top . . . the poor things."

In spite of her sympathy for the oven dwellers, Grace took Joe's fall hard. As mentioned, she just couldn't keep quiet about Cities Service. ("Sell all your U.S. Steel, Bethlehem, General Motors, Radio, buy Cities Service, it's going through the roof," Joe's Pittsburgh broker urged. It started for the roof, made an abrupt turn, plunged to the cellar.)

Poor Joe, he hung his head, tossed and turned at night, got up early, looked out the bedroom window, down toward the long stretch of silent ovens. There seemed to be no end to the dreadful news. The mine went from seven days a week to six, to five, to four, to three, to two, then it shut down completely and with that Joe's salary was cut in half. The real estate in town became a liability, taxes due, no rent coming in.

Christmas, 1931, was gloomy. July Fourth, 1932, once a big day at Locust Grove Park, passed with a few little fizzling firecrackers. It appeared certain that the son in college and the two girls in business school would have to stay home.

The depths plumbed, the bottom reached, Grace showed her true colors. She sold her fur coat to the furrier in town, receiving three hundred dollars, ten percent of its original cost. She closed four charge accounts, cut back on the remaining three. It broke her heart. She gave notice to the two blonde Polish girls from the patch, saving two dollars a week on each. She made the older kids take care of the big garden out back, formerly the pride and joy of Mr. Ferratti—he even went from plant to plant brushing off the cinders.

And, around early August, 1932, she gave Joe the beautiful diamond bracelet to pawn. She made a noble effort to be matter-of-fact but failed miserably.

"Papa had it . . . he was in Pittsburgh for a meeting . . . he had it appraised before we were married, Joe. The jeweler said that it was worth at least . . . at least . . . fifteen thousand dollars. When things get better we can reclaim it . . . I suppose you have to go to a pawnbroker."

Poor Joe, he hung his head—didn't get angry, couldn't, his spirit was gone, he blamed himself for their terrible situation. He took the bracelet. But he couldn't bring himself to pawn it. Instead he borrowed on his life insurance. The subject too excruciating, Grace never asked how much he had gotten for the bracelet.

Such were things when the Yale man appeared; the ovens banked, the mine shut down, just the pumps running to keep the water out. The poor horses—big horses, since the coal vein was ten feet high in the mine at Catherine #1—stabled inside the mine (some hadn't seen daylight for two or three years) had been brought out the day before.

There was a knock on Joe's office door and Hobbes, the only clerk left on the payroll, said that there was a gentleman to see Mr. Ralston, Mr. Joseph Ralston.

"Who is it, Hobbes?" asked Joe wearily, certain it was another desperate out-of-work miner coming to plead for another dollar or two of credit at the company store, the family down to dandelion greens and skunk cabbage.

Twenty minutes later, darkness fallen, the coal stove in the corner giving off a crackling warmth, Joe and Bill were still in the office, still finding it hard to believe, for the caller

turned out to be Devereux Strawbridge II, the Yale man.

He looked in his middle fifties, a dissipated middle fifties. He was tall, thirty pounds or so overweight, grayhaired, with a flushed, somewhat bloated face, a face that had obviously once been strikingly handsome. He wore a blue suit whose cut and fabric indicated top quality but which, like its owner, had seen better days. His gray topcoat, which he took off as he entered the office, had also seen better days, as had the white shirt.

His blue eyes tinged with a watery red film, his voice somewhat slurry, the Yale man, ushered in by Hobbes, took the vacant chair in front of Joe's desk and announced:

"My name is Devereux Strawbridge II . . . ah . . . pardon me, gentlemen . . . this more than slightly incommoding predicament in which I find myself . . . ah . . . requires that I seek fortification," at which he took a small silver flask from the inside pocket of his topcoat and partook of a gurgling quaff.

"That's better," he said a bit more slurrily, as he returned the flask to the topcoat. "Which one of you gentleman is Mr. Joseph Ralston?"

"I am," poor Joe managed, a kind of squeak, then more forcefully, "I am. Why, may I ask?"

"Well . . . this is an extremely personal matter, and it is going to be extraordinarily difficult for me to, ah, broach the subject to one party alone," he said, and then stopped and turned in Bill's direction. "Would it be egregiously presumptuous of me, old chap, to beg your forbearance and ask you to leave Mr. Ralston and . . ."

"Hell," said Bill, interrupting and jumping out of his chair, "I'll go, you don't have to make a speech about it, I'm . . ."

"Sit down, Bill," ordered Joe, in a firm voice. "Go on, sit down." And when Bill, a small smirk on his face, sat down, Joe turned to the Yale man.

"This is my brother Bill," Joe said, sitting up straight in his swivel chair. "Now, what is it you want, Mr. . . . Strawbridge?"

It required another reinforcement from the flask. Then, the speech definitely slurry, the Yale man got to the point. He had been wiped out in the market crash. Had lost everything—even, and here the voice broke. There was a long silence. Joe looked at Bill, Bill looked at Joe, each shook his head.

"Even my stable of polo ponies," the Yale man finally managed. "Of course, well, old age catches up with all of us, but as a replacement for the younger players, I was able to play an occasional

chukker or two . . . they're gone . . . everything is gone."

"It must be real tough," said Bill, very sarcastically. "What about the Stutz—didn't we see you drive up in it?"

"Ah, the Stutz, a superb auto, superb," answered the Yale man mournfully. "But it does not belong to me. I, ah, it is borrowed from a friend."

"Well, Mr. Strawbridge," said Joe, trying to control his voice, his heart, his stomach—this was . . . was incredible. "You have our . . . sympathy" (not mine, indicated Bill, making a face), "but I'm afraid you've made a wasted trip. There is no work here; none. And if there were it would have to be given to our own people. I'm sorry."

The Yale man smiled, a melancholy smile.

"I am, of course, aware of the cata . . . the cata . . . catastrophic . . . there, I made it . . . how bad things are in the coal industry, in all industry. It is not . . . oh good Lord, this is devastating but . . . the reason I am here . . . ah . . . some years ago, on the occasion of your wife's thirtieth birthday, Mr. Ralston, I sent Grace . . . Mrs. Ralston . . . of course she was still Grace O'Connell then . . . I sent a rather valuable diamond bracelet, I have the receipt with me. If . . ."

"No," snapped Joe. "Get to the point."

"Jesus Christ," exclaimed Bill, suddenly anticipating what was coming.

"Yes," said the Yale man, his slurry voice faltering, his hands beginning to shake. "I have an opportunity to invest in a small, ill-financed pharmaceutical company with enormous potential . . . it would mean an immediate managerial position for me with the promise of a future . . . a bright future. The investment would be in the neighborhood of five thousand dollars and . . . dear God . . . how low have I sunk . . . if Mrs. Ralston still has the bracelet, perhaps she could be prevailed upon to . . . oh, good God . . . allow me to borrow it so that I may use it as collateral for a loan. If all goes as well as it appears, I would be able to return it, with interest, within say two years at the most. I would naturally sign a document to that effect."

With that, as two shocked persons—Joe Ralston and his brother Bill—looked at one another in complete astonishment, the Yale man fumbled around in his topcoat, finally found the flask, drained it in a quick slurping quaff, drops falling from his lips onto his coat, his shirt.

Joe had a terrible time sleeping that night. Bill had given him holy hell for handing the Yale man eight dollars. ("The Lafayette House in town has nice rooms for two dollars, dinner for fifty cents," poor embarrassed Joe had said, and then, "I'll be in to see you around nine in the morning. I need some time to think this over".) And even more hell for phoning the company store manager and telling him to fill the Stutz gas tank and charge it to the Ralston account.

"Christ, Joe," Bill had stormed. "Here was your God-given chance to show Grace what a drunken bum . . . hell, only the lowest scum on earth would . . . imagine, coming out here from New York to borrow a present he gave . . . someone years ago. You should have invited the son of a bitch to supper—couldn't you see my signals?—that would have ended things once and for all."

"I saw your signals, Bill," Joe told him, mournfully. "But I couldn't have done it, Bill. I just couldn't. Poor Grace—wait a minute, let me finish—she's had it tough. I know, I know, she's also had . . . things pretty nice, but you and I, Bill, have talked this over too many times. Grace is . . . it's hard for me to say it but she is . . . a talented person who, well, she could have been a great singer, and maybe a famous writer . . . now wait, Bill, wait, she often gets up at five in the morning to write her poems, her stories. She, well, she had dreams, Bill, and . . . and maybe I should have done more to help her realize those dreams. How I don't know, but I do know it would break her heart if she were to see this . . . this Yale man, with all the golden memories of . . . ah, hell, I can't hurt her, I just can't, ever, and I won't."

"Okay, but about the bracelet? You sure as hell aren't going to let him have it, are you . . . you wouldn't?"

"I don't know, I don't know," exclaimed Joe, becoming quite agitated. "I'm going to think it over tonight. But that damn thing has been a terrible cross for me to bear, and you know Grace gave it to me to pawn. She thinks I've pawned it long ago. I couldn't . . . using money from His Nibs . . . that would be too much. I'm sick of the thing . . . sick of it . . . I'm often tempted to take a hammer and . . . well, I'd better go. I'm already late for supper, and you know what that means."

It meant that Grace was in a bad mood.

"It seems to me," she said in that imperious tone so prevalent of late, "you could at least phone home if you're going to be late. The children are starved. And I can't understand what could

keep you at the office now that nothing's working."

"Something came up," said Joe, holding his temper. Poor Mother, the girls thought; poor Daddy, the boys thought.

Joe was at the office by seven thirty next morning, another cold, gloomy morning. It was spitting snow. He had the diamond bracelet with him, cushioned in its gold-plated little box. Now listen, Bill—he had rehearsed what to say—I've made up my mind. I don't want any more discussion, not a single word. I'm going to get rid of this damn thing once and for all. And I don't give one damn if I never see it again.

Sven Hanson, the grizzled stable boss, was waiting outside the office door. He had startling news. A dead man in the stable, kicked in the head by one of the horses.

"Good grief, man . . . a dead man . . . kicked by one of the horses," gasped Joe. "My God . . . come on . . . let's get inside."

Fortunately it was Hobbes's day off, so there was no need to caution Sven to lower his booming voice.

"Them poor horses vat vas jest brought outta the mine, been down there two, three years in no sunshine . . . we got, like you told us, blinkers on them. Anyways, last night startin' right at dark come lotsa snortin' 'en whinn'in 'en kicking the stalls . . . headlights from autos turnin' the curve by the stable shining in on them poor things . . . them not usta the lights . . . 'en . . ."

"Please, Sven, get to the point," implored Joe.

Bill made good time from Mrs. McArdale's boarding house, Joe having phoned on the company phone calmly—he had sat for a good ten minutes after dispatching Sven back to the stable—asking Mrs. McArdale, a well-known quidnunc (God, if she ever found out), to ask his brother Bill to come down to the office as soon as possible, some little errand he wanted Bill to run, nothing important.

"You mean that . . . that it's His Nibs . . . our . . . your . . . Grace's Yale man? How the hell did Sven know that?"

"He didn't, but the Stutz is parked alongside the stable," answered a pale, agitated Joe. "The way I have it figured, Bill, how else could it be, it was dark when Strawbridge left here, and when you go around that curve at the stable, the car lights shine in. The horses from the mine, only out from their stable in the mine a day or so, they must have made a fuss when his car's lights shone into the stable."

"And he heard the horses and . . . old polo player . . . drunk as he was, . . . just had to find out what or why or something. Had to be he was unconsciously drawn to the sound. Did he wreck the Stutz?" said Bill.

"Almost. He got it stopped within an inch or so of the stable."

"Okay, Joe," said Bill, "now what? How the hell are you going to keep this from Grace? We've got a dead man on our hands. You're not going to try something . . . funny, Joe . . . just so Grace won't find out?"

"What do you want me to do, Bill," answered Joe, pacing the floor, wringing his hands. "Do you want me to take her up to the stable and show her her old flame, smelling of whisky and lying in a pile of manure, dead, kicked to death by a mine horse? Wait, Bill, please. Let me finish. It's a rotten world, Bill . . . how many real long-lasting joys, I guess is what I mean. Poor Grace. She had a summer love . . . long ago. . . . It was something to always remember—fondly remember. Didn't you ever have a summer love, Bill? I'll bet you did. I did. I often think of her, we had such a dear sweet time. My memories of her are of a lovely, good, decent, laughing girl. Can't you see, Bill, what if that summer girl appeared out of the blue . . . the equivalent of poor Strawbridge, how would I feel? I can't let Grace see . . . know that . . . the poor wretched human being up there in the stable is her Prince Charming."

"Okay, okay, Joe," Bill said, an odd, funny catch in his voice, "I think I understand. But how in hell are we going to keep something like this quiet?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. But the election's only ten days away. The county people are indebted to me, through The Company's money. For past efforts and with the prospect of a close race this time, they'll need every vote, and a favor to me, well, Catherine #1 has always gone for the party. Maybe they'll come through; we're going to try."

Of course the authorities—the sheriff, the coroner, the prothonotary, all up for reelection in a few days and desperately in need of every single vote—were only too happy to cooperate with a long-time party supporter. Sure they would keep it quiet. Hell, it was cut and dried. An alcoholic ne'er-do-well relative of Superintendent Ralston's, kicked in the head by a horse (Bill explained this, Joe sure he would not be able to handle it).

It worked, Joe first giving Bill time to get up to the stable to get rid of the Stutz (the keys were still in the ignition), drive it to an isolated shed behind the slate pile. Then Joe phoned the sheriff

and went quickly to the stable to warn Sven to say nothing about the Stutz ("I be like a clam shut," Sven promised and he was).

Joe and Bill were back at the mine office by eleven thirty, the Yale man safely stowed away in the refrigerated section of the county morgue pending the next step, which was a long distance phone call to a Mr. Hollister J. Judson, 100 Lockmeer Lane, Great Neck, Long Island, his name appearing on the owner's card found in the glove compartment of the Stutz.

Mr. Judson, a short, stout, pompous, well-dressed chap, arrived via taxi from Manorsville around one in the afternoon the following day, having taken the Pennsylvania Flyer to Pittsburgh, the local to Manorsville. He had nothing good to say about Dévereux Strawbridge II.

"To think that despicable creature would steal the Stutz after all I've done for him," he said, quite indignantly. "Why, he's lived in my carriage house, rent free for the past two and a half years. I've lent him money, hundreds of dollars. I've bailed him out of jail . . . the poor bastard's been arrested for public drunkenness. Well, it's a sad case, gentlemen, he had it all . . . lost it in the crash. I tried to tell him to sell Cities Service when it hit 97 but, no, he listened to the brokers" (poor Joe, Bill couldn't help noticing how pale he got at the mention of . . . of . . .). "Well, gentlemen, if one of you will drive me to where my car is, I'll be off for Long Island."

"But, sir, Mr. Judson," Joe said, beseechingly, "what about Mr. Strawbridge? I, we, ah, I hoped you would handle funeral arrangements."

No sir, nope, nope, nope. Mr. Judson was emphatic. And when poor shocked Joe recovered and asked just who would be the likely person to take care of things, Mr. Judson was emphatic on that score. The wives were out of question, long divorced, both long dead, one a suicide, the other killed in an auto accident on the Riviera.

"But, but," begged Joe, "aren't there any relatives, someone to notify about the . . . body."

Nope, Dev was the last of his clan. Oh, there was an old aunt in Boston, and, yes, a distant cousin in New York City, yes, he knew their names. He gave Joe their names. Then, "I'm in a hurry, gentlemen. I hope to make Pottstown by this evening." Bill drove him down to where the Stutz was hidden.

That was that, almost. Joe, heavy of heart, managed to have the long distance operator locate both the old aunt in Boston ("Poor

Dev, I knew he would come to no good end . . . all those Follies girls. No, no, I am too old to get involved. You provide a decent burial there, buy a nice funeral wreath and send me the bill. Poor Dev, he was such a handsome man . . . poor Dev") and the cousin in New York ("Ha, me, forget it . . . hell, we hated each other. He was always disgracing the family name. He once rode a horse with a half-naked showgirl on behind through the Waldorf lobby. I suggest you . . . Mr. Ralston, is it?, yes . . . I suggest you bury him with the least amount of fanfare. No, there is absolutely no one else . . . he's the last of his kind, who would want the responsibility?").

That, now, definitely was that.

"Jesus Christ, Bill," moaned Joe after four in the afternoon of an extremely hectic day. "We can't have him buried in any of the cemeteries. There'd be too much paperwork, too much . . ."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Bill, "I have an idea. What about the county home graveyard? Hell, he'd be out of the way forever."

The biggest problem next day turned out to be how Joe could explain to Grace that he wouldn't be home for supper. Finally Bill suggested he use the excuse that the county authorities had asked Joe to come to the final pre-election strategy meeting in the courthouse basement.

"H'mmmm," was all Grace said, having promised God she would make a diligent effort to control her temper, stop complaining.

Bill borrowed Harry Phillips' Ford pickup; the coroner helped load the body, frozen stiff, into the truck while Joe waited in the basement of the county home, cushioning the pine box with white comforts he had bought at Montgomery Ward.

Grace never found out. Sure, yes, of course, there was talk about the abrupt way the postcards stopped coming.

"He probably died climbing the Alps," one of the older girls romanticized.

"Or drowned swimming the Hellespont," another sighed.

Grace pretended she was thankful "the whole silly postcard business is finished. After all, that was long ago, way in the past . . . and I am a married woman. Now let's not hear any more about it."

Joe Ralston died in 1950, the family—the ones still at home—still living out in the coal region at Catherine #1. Trees grew through the openings in the ovens, wildflowers completely covered the areas behind the ovens where the filthy, thick sulphur smoke had once killed all vegetation for a half mile or more. Newly built by-products along the Monongahela had replaced all the beehive ovens in

the southwestern Pennsylvania coal region. And there was no smoke at all from the few trains that passed the house now, the locomotives all diesel.

To Grace's surprise and outrage, Joe had borrowed on his life insurance. So instead of being able to buy a nice house in town, she was forced to live in an apartment, the married children all helping.

"Poor Mother," one of the married girls used to say whenever they got together. "If she had only married the Yale man, she'd be living like a queen now."

"So would a lot of us," a disgruntled one would say.

"Poor Daddy," the boys would say. "Mother never really appreciated what a wonderful husband he was. Poor Daddy."

Grace Ralston died in 1962, at eighty-three still writing poetry, stories, novels, selling nothing, the dear woman, and still retaining more than an inkling of the once superlative pulchritude that Joe used to be so proud of, so in awe of.

Just as they had done for their father, back in 1950, the children, the grandchildren—a multitude by then—got together at the country club after the funeral of their mother, for food and drink. Uncle Bill was there. He was approaching the end of the line, still drinking a little too much. He jumped up suddenly at the country club, banged on an empty beer pitcher with a tablespoon, demanded silence. It fell slowly, everyone wondering what old Uncle Bill was up to.

"Listen," he yelled, swaying a bit, grabbing the edge of the table, "I'm gettin' fed up with all this talk about how great your mother, grandmother, Grace was, nobody remembering that your father Joe . . . why, he was a better man than . . . than . . . Gunga Din ever was. I could tell you a story that . . . ah, the hell with it."

With that poor old maundering Uncle Bill plopped down onto his chair. Everyone grinned; good old Uncle Bill, he misses talking about Notre Dame and the Pirates with Daddy, Grandpa.

Uncle Bill died the following year. He had a small funeral. There was no gathering at the country club afterwards, everyone had things to do.

It took the sheriff—he had been raised on a farm where they still had a horse—about ten minutes to determine that the poor soul who had almost rolled out of the coffin at the county home hadn't been murdered at all. The coroner—he had enough problems with current-day corpses—agreed.

"Hell, this poor bastard got kicked by a horse," the sheriff explained. "A big horse, too. Probably one of those that used to plow the garden here. Go get a horseshoe, Pete," he ordered one of his deputies.

"Where the hell am I gonna find a horseshoe, sheriff?" protested Pete, and then, "Okay, I got it, the Lincoln Street park . . . they have a horseshoe pitching court, or whatever they call it."

It took Pete less than fifteen minutes to return with a big horseshoe, the little, rather subdued group around the pitiful coffin, its pitiful occupant, wondering what the poor creature's life had been like.

"Well," said the sheriff, "you can bet he had a tough life. You had to be down and out, up against it, to end up in the county home." Everyone nodded. Then the sheriff turned to Nickie.

"What the hell are you shaking about, kid? Nobody's blaming you. You were just doing your job. Take it easy."

"Well, sheriff," Nickie managed, "the way the body tilted when the coffin landed on that pile of dirt . . . I . . . it looked like he was gonna roll out onto the ground. It was scary."

"Sure it was but . . . wait a minute, here comes Pete with the horseshoe."

The horseshoe fitted the three deep breaks in the skull. That was that. The Montgomery Ward comforts—a bit mildewed but in better condition than the Yale man—were straightened out, the body was eased back to the center of the coffin, the lid nailed back on, the coffin loaded onto a pickup, and before nightfall the Yale man was once more underground, this time on the newly created, no frills cemetery on the abandoned farm far from the polo fields of Long Island, the exotic wild animal preserves of East Africa ("On safari with the Prince of Wales, Dev.").

That was a Tuesday. On Saturday, his day off, Nickie was inside the only remaining licensed pawnbroker's place in Pittsburgh by nine fifteen in the morning. While Iggy, a short little wrinkled gnomish chap, examined the diamond bracelet with his ten-power magnifying glass, Nickie fidgeted outside the wire cage with its bulletproof glass.

"How about it?" Nickie said, nervously. "You've looked at it long enough to make up your mind, hain't you?"

Iggy every now and then—not often after thirty-five years in the business—got excited, but he had learned to control himself. This one was in the upper end of all four "C's": carat, cut, color, clarity.

And long experience told him that the kid outside the cage didn't have a legitimate claim to the bracelet. He might not have stolen it, maybe came across it accidentally, found it. But here was a chance to make a real killing.

"Well," he said, taking the magnifying glass from his eye, shaking his head, giving all indications of not being too enthusiastic, "we've got two possibilities here. One . . . let me see a bill of sale, a receipt, and I can let you have . . . around twenty-five hundred . . ."

"And," groaned Nickie, "what if I . . . I lost it . . . don't have . . . any receipt?"

"Five hundred, tops."

"I'll take it."

Once outside, making good time away from the pawnshop, Nickie thought, Well, it'll pay for Mom's false teeth, maybe.

Turning a corner, relaxing a bit, no cops around, Nickie went on thinking:

I'll bet that little, ugly, sawed-off bastard cheated me blind. So what? I come out ahead. Goes to show you gotta be lucky. Hadn't that, that half-eaten corpse slid to the side of the coffin, pullin' them blankets with him, I'd never in a million years seen that box under them blankets. Me worryin' about gettin' hell from the foreman fer the backhoe pullin' the lid off the coffin . . . and then seein' the little box.

Then, for the fortieth or fiftieth time, he thought:

I still say whatever the hell nitwit put that bracelet in the coffin had to be the all-time screwball. Hell, he coulda snuck the bracelet outta the box, put it in his pocket, made a big deal, case anyone was around, of puttin' the box under them blankets. Boy, what a screwball. Now what I gotta do next is figure out some ordinary-like story about where I got this five hundred. Hell, I can't tell Ma the truth, Jesus, no, she'd come up with some crazy story, her and her soap operas and all them romance novels she reads. She'd have it all over the neighborhood . . . all about . . . summer and moonlight and music and . . . lost love and broken hearts, 'en she'd have that poor son of a bitch I dug up bein' a prince of some kind what give up the throne . . . the bracelet being bad luck fer generations . . . when all the time there's some ordinary reason fer it like I been thinkin'. Somebody hid that bracelet, plannin' ta dig it up later when all the fuss had died down. What the hell other reason can there be? Lost love . . . broken hearts . . . true love . . . come on, Ma, git off it.

UNSOLVED

*by Emily Cox
and Henry Rathvon*

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

On top of old Smokey all covered with trees,
I met an old geezer whose name was McGeeze.
He told me, "Young feller, I've lived in these pines
For seventy years, taking gold from the mines.

"I'm rich as a king in this tumbledown shack,
And ore that I've dug has filled many a sack,
I've more than I need, and I'm cranky and old,
So I'll give you, young feller, one bagful of gold.

"But first you must answer a riddle I've set.
It's hard, and nobody has answered it yet.
It features some tribesmen, and here is your clue:
Some always speak false and some always speak true.

"The names of these Indians, seven in all,
Are Barjuk, Gooth, Fumfum, Fy, Fo, Fu, and Fol.
Imagine them standing arranged in a row
And making in turn their pronouncements like so:

"The first one says, 'Third in our lineup is Fy,
And fourth is a person who can't tell a lie.'
The second says, 'Let me be honestly heard.
The sixth in our lineup is true to his word.'

"The third one says, 'Fumfum will always speak true,
And seventh of all in our lineup is Fu.'
The fourth remarks, 'I have the key that you seek:

You'll find more than half of us lie when we speak.'

"The fifth asserts, 'Fourth in the lineup is Gooth,
And Fu is a tribesman who can't speak the truth.'
The sixth one declares, 'The fifth, second, and I
Cannot be believed, for all three of us lie.'

"The seventh says, 'Barjuk's not sixth in our row.
The man who stands first is the one we call Fo.'
So tell me, young feller," the geezer exclaimed,
"Which tribesmen are honest, and what is each named?"

I pondered the puzzle till round in my head
The pieces all jumbled and tumbled and sped.
On top of old Smokey I sat in a mist,
Alone in the pines with my chin on my fist.

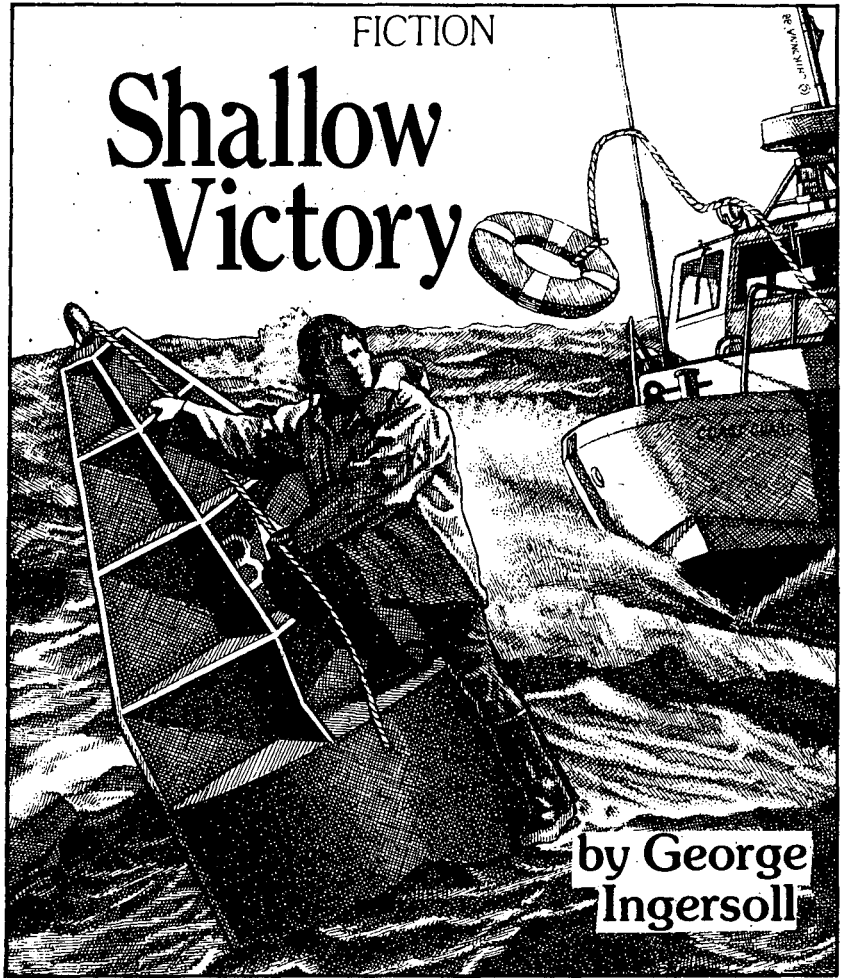
As soon as the moon was alight in the trees
I leaped to my feet and I answered McGeeze.
To gold in a sack I then laid my just claim.
I ask you, dear reader—could you do the same?

See page 132 for the solution to the May puzzle.

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FICTION

Shallow Victory



by George
Ingersoll

It was a small but exclusive annual event, announced with as much fanfare as a gathering of dons in Appalachia. The guest list seldom exceeded thirty, all elderly or middle-aged folk to whose lips the term "rich" brought a gentle smile. They were not movers and shakers, their faces were

never on the covers of national magazines . . . they hired such people. Each spring they gathered, quietly, not for any sinister purpose but because, now and then, it was nice to fraternize with peers with whom they could feel at home. This annual event had become known as the Cookout.

Illustration by Ronald Chironna

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The culmination of each Cookout was a formal dinner, at which jewelry was worn. Safe deposit boxes from Zurich to Palm Springs yielded up their contents for this event. The resulting display was not in a spirit of competition but, rather, in fun. The Cookout was known to certain members of the criminal community, but none of these pros would touch it. They also knew the collective power of those in attendance, and had quietly decided that the game was not worth the candle. Thus it was that the heist of the Cookout was an amateur affair, but planned and executed with a skill that would have done credit to any pro. And it very nearly worked.

This spring's Cookout was being held at an obscure estate far out at the end of Long Island. It was ten P.M., and the dinner was approaching the cigars-and-port stage, when three men wearing ski masks parked their van behind some bushes near, but not too near, the mouth of the estate's winding drive. Security this night was being provided by six large men who'd come in as chauffeurs and were now prowling the grounds. Their walkie-talkies crackled simultaneously, "Caliban Caliban. The big garage. Right now. Move it!"

The six men were met at the garage by two ski-masked men

holding AK47's, and were quickly but efficiently trussed, taped, and deposited in the back of a caterer's truck. Exeunt Security.

Ski-mask Three appeared. "I took care of the phone lines. They may be reaching out, but they won't be touching anyone for a bit."

"Good," said Mask One, "now get around back to the big kitchen and ride herd on all the Care Bears . . . they should be decorously whooping it up by now. We'll take care of the mommy and daddy bears in the dining room. And remember . . . if you have to shoot, shoot *up*. No bloodshed! That's an order."

"Aye aye," said Mask Three, and vanished.

In less than half an hour the flock had been plucked and the operation was complete. The group in the dining room had been readily persuaded that insured jewelry was not worth the risk of being maimed, or worse, by gunfire. Mask One held a plastic supermarket shopping bag containing gemstones and loose cash in an amount exceeding the annual budgets of some small countries. He picked up his walkie-talkie and said, "Three . . . go!" Exeunt Thieves.

Running down the drive, Mask One had the bag and Mask Two had the guns. Mask Three was strewing quantities

of bootlegger's nails behind him. "No car's going to make it to the gate except on its rims," he said.

In the van Mask One said, "Get that scanner going." They had about seven miles of lonely highway to traverse, during which time they'd be vulnerable. After that they'd be into a highly populated network of highways, roads, and residential streets where they'd be safe. Four of the seven miles were behind them when Two looked up from the scanner. "Gentlemen, we seem to have a problem. We overlooked something. CB... one of the cars had one. The cops are stopping westbound traffic at Greenport, and that's our only way out."

Mask One was not the sort to waste time on lamentation. "That scanner paid off. God bless Radio Shack! Maybe we can find a deserted beach house and hole up till the heat's off. Let's see where this leads; we've got nothing to lose." He hauled the van hard right into a narrow, rutted lane. They bumped through scrub for a few hundred yards and, abruptly, were on the waterfront. They had emerged onto a parking area of sorts, paved with cinders and crushed shell, which ended in a bulkhead at water's edge. A rusty pickup was parked there, and along the bulkhead bobbed

a well-kept sportsfisherman. A man was working on deck. "Well, well," said Mask One.

The man stopped, squinting directly into the glare of the van's lights, then sprang nimbly onto the bulkhead and started toward them. Mask One called, from behind the lights, "You the cap'n of this rig?"

"Yup. Jack Cummings. Say, mister, if you're looking for a fishing charter you'll have to call during the day. Right now I'm busy. Here, I'll give you a card and..." Mask Two slipped from behind the lights with a gun.

"Hold it! Right there."

Cummings froze. "Hey! I've got no money. Would I be bustin' my butt at eleven o'clock at night down here if I did?"

Mask One nudged him back aboard. The deck lights were sufficient, and less conspicuous than headlights on the shore. "Three... kill the lights, then come aboard." To Cummings, "Cap'n, we don't need your money, just the loan of your boat for a little bit. What are you doing aboard at this hour?"

"Getting her cleaned up for a mackerel party in the morning. This early in the season I can't get a fishing party every day, so I do some lobstering on the side. See?" He pointed to a lobster pot, lines, and float piled up on deck. "I got to get all this gear off and wash down the

deck for when those dudes come aboard tomorrow morning. I run a clean boat."

"Then you weren't fixing any engine problems, cap'n?"

"Nope. Engine's fine."

"Fuel?"

"Topped up on m'way in. Charter's leaving at five thirty."

"You have a chart of this area?"

"Chart! I don't need no chart."

"I'm sure you don't, but *I'm* driving, and I'm allergic to rocks. The chart, please? Thank you. Now, cap'n, please get right aft and sit down on deck, against the transom, and don't do anything foolish. This is a good boat, and I promise you we won't even scratch the paintwork. Two . . . do we have Loran?"

"Yessir. Radar, too."

"Good." Mask One started the engine and swung the wheel experimentally. "Lines, Three."

"Aye aye."

For the second time that night the three thieves faded into the darkness, accompanied by a reluctant Cummings. Exeunt all.

Just at dawn a Coast Guard whaleboat abruptly altered course and plucked a very wet, very cold Jack Cummings off the top of a nun buoy. The chief in command wrapped him in a blanket and said to the youth at the tiller, "Head for the shed, son, and try to avoid the larger icebergs."

"Icebergs aye," said the youth, with infinite boredom, and popped his bubble gum. The chief turned his attention to the sodden Cummings.

"'Lo, Jack. Nice mahrnin'. Okay?"

"Mite chilly, Crow. What's got you young fellas out burnin' the taxpayers' gas so early?"

"We had a signal you might be floatin' around out here someplace, so we came to look. Can't have that, you know. Menace to navigation."

"Hey, Crow! You people happen to find my boat at all?"

"Betcher sweet aye. She's tied up at our pier, safe and sound, courtesy of the Coast Guard. It'll be on your next month's Master Charge."

"You get the bastards did the piracy?"

"You want to talk piracy, you want the Marines. Tripoli and all that. Next booth over. I understand that our people did take three persons off your boat. They are now being held in our pleasure palace, awaiting the pleasure of the civil authorities. My orders are only to find you and, the commander's respects, he'd like to talk to you soon's we get you wrung out and let you call home."

Back on station, in borrowed clothes and equipped with a large mug of hot coffee, Cummings sat facing the commander.

"You were lucky, Cap'n Cummings. Your boat and your skin are both intact, and all you're out is the price of a charter. The police will be here and will want to hear all about it, and so do we. We had a call from them about eleven fifteen last night. Seems they found a van parked at your pier with the engine still warm and your boat gone, so they asked us to have a look around. Not too much traffic at that hour . . . we had you on radar in five minutes and our boys stopped them and boarded her by midnight. They didn't get far.

"Their story is that they were all a bit high and decided they wanted to go for a boat ride. They couldn't persuade you to take them out, so they threw a little scare into you and took her out themselves. They claim you jumped overboard."

"Part true," grunted Cummings. "They damn sure threw a scare into me, and I did jump overboard."

The commander excused himself to take a phone call. He did a great deal of listening and very little talking. Finally, swinging back to Cummings, he said, "That was some police captain from Manhattan. Seems there was a major robbery last night at a place out past Greenport. Enormous sum in jewels and cash taken. The people robbed are important enough so

that the mayor and the police commissioner are involved. It was done by three men, and the only lead they have at the moment is you and your boat, and the three we took off her. I'm asked to hold you and impound your boat till they get here. You better tell me everything about it."

Cummings started with the arrival of the van and gave him the whole story. "They were seamen, those three. From what I heard; I'd judge that the big one doing the navigating was an officer, and the other two were probably petty officers. None of them needed any prompting about my boat.

"After we got under way the one they called Two got the radio and the radar and the Loran all going. The big one had the chart laid out and the depth finder on. The one they called Three just sat there, with one foot on a plastic bag, and held that big old gun on me.

"They headed west, and held her about five hundred yards off shore. From the wake and engine noise, I'd judge they kept her at about five or six knots; quieter that way. Once they had a little huddle, all of them looking at me. I figured they were deciding what to do with me. They didn't have too many options. I figured I didn't either.

"I knew we had a nun buoy

coming up, and the big one did, too. I could see him going from the chart to the radar; then he made a small course change, to clear it comfortably. There was some shipping coming toward us, then they killed all the lights, including the stern light. That's when I decided to go over the side. I didn't think they were going to waste time looking for me, and they didn't.

"That's when I really got lucky . . . I found that buoy in the dark, right off, and climbed aboard. That water was *cold*! I doubt if I'd of made it to shore before hypothermia took over. That's where Crow found me this morning."

"Am I correct," asked the commander, "that, when you last saw them, they were armed, wearing ski-masks, and had a plastic shopping bag?"

"Yessir."

"Well, there were no guns or masks or plastic bags aboard when we stopped her."

"Lotta bottom out there, commander."

"I can understand their disposing of the guns and masks, but that bag must have been the loot from the robbery. Why deep-six that? It was a fortune . . . they could have turned it in and probably gotten off with a lighter sentence."

Cummings chuckled. "Commander, you are an officer and a gentleman. You don't think

like a crook. I believe either Crow or me could make a shrewd guess at the answer to that question."

"You or Crow? What's Chief Stites got to do with this?"

"Nothing . . . only that he's a chief, and I'm an ex-chief, and everybody knows that chiefs are crooks and thieves by nature. We can think like crooks."

"That loot was the only thing linking those three to the robbery. Nobody saw their faces, and I'm sure they wore gloves. They've probably written me off as lobster food by now. So what does anybody have on them? Larceny of a small boat. And it's back without a scratch. A good lawyer could probably get them off with a fine. And if they're three old shipmates with good service records . . . old buddies out on a spree . . . it probably wouldn't be much of a fine, at that."

"And don't forget. They know exactly where that loot is . . . they can go back for it any time after the heat's off. The water's only three or four fathoms there . . . no trick at all for somebody with a scuba set."

"How could they possibly know exactly where . . . oh! A Loran fix."

"Yessir. I sprung for a pretty damn good Loran. That thing will put you within yards of a position any time of day or

night. All they had to do was weight the bag, dump it, and hit the waypoint button on the Loran. Then they display the waypoint, memorize the coordinates, and erase the waypoint."

The commander thought all that over. "But the scour, man. That plastic bag could be anywhere with the tide through there the way it is."

"Not if they weighted it properly. I left a lobster pot on deck. If they put it in that and dropped it, it wouldn't go anyplace but straight down, and stay there. Was that pot still aboard?"

"No. My people reported that the only thing on deck was a lobster float, with a few feet of line tied to it. The line had been cut."

"Is there a reward for that loot, commander?"

Before he got an answer, the police arrived. Cummings was questioned at length, and given a typescript of his statement to sign. He repeated his suspicion that the three suspects knew the location of the loot, and gave his reasons. The investigating officer listened but appeared unimpressed. His boat was searched again, with negative results. Finally Cummings was made to view the suspects. "All I can swear to," he said, "is that there's the right number of them, and they're the right shape and size.

I never did see their faces."

When he asked when he could have his boat, he was told "a couple of days." He was released, with the admonition to "stay available."

That night the television news carried an account of the robbery, with the information that a sizeable reward had been offered for recovery of the loot. Cummings grinned again. "That should cover three days' lost fishing."

Next morning he called the Coast Guard station and requested an appointment with the commander.

"Morning, commander. You all finished with the cops now?"

"Yes."

"Good. It wouldn't do you any harm if you and your people were to recover the loot, would it?"

"Harm? I'd probably be promoted to commander of the entire Naval District. Why?"

"I'd say there's a fifty-fifty chance that, by tomorrow this time, I can hand you that loot. All you have to do is lend me Crow and that whaleboat and a few pairs of binoculars. I didn't want to talk about this until we were through with the cops because you'd of been obliged to tell them my theory, and then it would have been a police boat picking up the loot and you'd be out in the cold. I know you people can't accept a

financial reward but I sure can, and I'd like to see you get the kudos."

The commander looked grim. "Cummings, if you've misrepresented, or you're hiding something, you came to the wrong place. You're in trouble."

Cummings grinned again. "Relax, commander. You *and* the cops know every single fact I know, and some of my theories. They weren't much interested in my theory about the Loran fix. There's no law that says I have to tell them about another theory of mine. That's why I'm here."

The commander looked dubious. "Go on."

"Those three that took my boat may be seamen but they don't know beans about lobstering. I believe they put that bag of loot in my lobster pot, cut off the float so as to avoid marking the location, and then threw the whole rig over the side. Let me tell you what they didn't know about that lobster rig.

"A basic lobster rig is a pot, the cage-like thing on the bottom that the lobsters wander into, connected by a length of line—we call it pot warp—to the float on the surface, so you can find your pot again. If you have your pot planted in an area of fast tide, a lot of fishermen place a toggle about halfway up the length of the warp. This is nothing more than

another float, which takes some of the tidal drag off the warp. Most people use an old gallon jug, with the handle secured to the warp.

"Now comes the fun part. Lots of us now use a link; here's one." Cummings tossed a small metal object before the commander. "What you do is, you make a bight, a hairpin-shaped loop, in the warp and hook this link across the ends. That effectively shortens the line, and the weight of the pot pulls the float completely under the surface and out of sight. After a timed interval, the corrosive action of the sea water eats away the link, the bight straightens out, and your float bobs to the surface, just about the time you're ready to haul. The idea is to keep your float out of sight as long as possible. Delivers from temptation the unscrupulous fishermen and pleasure boaters who might otherwise enjoy a free lobster dinner at your expense.

"I know how much warp was on my pot. I know where my toggle was. I know how big my bight was, and I know it was a forty-eight-hour link because that's all I ever use. I know that bottom where they threw over my pot is only about three or four fathoms; a lot shallower than I usually fish in. I figure that my toggle is, right this minute, maybe three to five feet

below the surface. I also figure that sometime around midnight tonight that link is going to let go, and my toggle is going to surface.

"Now, low tide tomorrow being about six thirty, if Crow and me and a few hands were out there in the whaleboat, patrolling between my favorite nun buoy and that point where you nabbed my boat, and we couldn't spot a floating gallon jug, the taxpayers are getting cheated. It's supposed to be a bluebird day, with no more chop than a bathtub."

"Let it be so," said the commander. "It's been a few years since I've been in a whaleboat, but you're looking at your tillerman. As Senior Officer Present, I'll get to write the report if we come up with anything, and I wouldn't care to pass up that opportunity." He picked up the phone. "Please ask Chief Stites to come to my office."

And so it came to pass that next morning at first light the whaleboat departed Cummings' nun buoy on a heading for the point about a sea-mile distant from where they'd colared his boat. True to his word, the commander was at the tiller and held her about five hundred yards offshore. Cummings and Crow shared the bow, with a

handful of lads, appropriately briefed, lining the thwarts.

And so it was, at seven A.M., and still at eight, at which point the commander beckoned Cummings aft. "You *did* say, did you not, that the link was set for midnight?"

"Yessir."

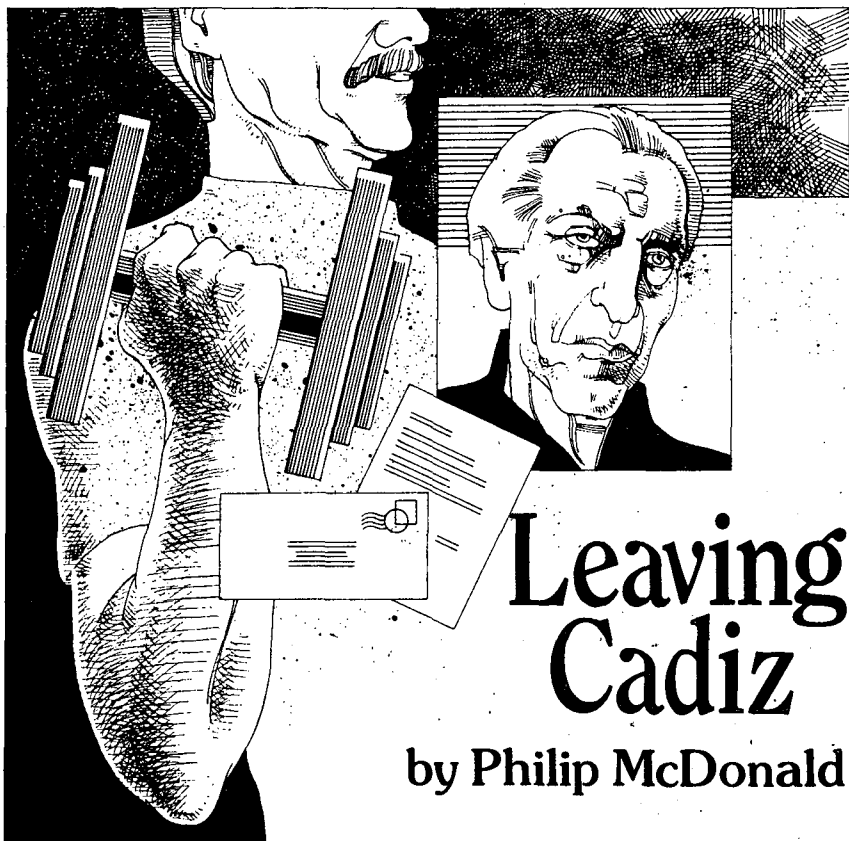
"I can appreciate that a mass-produced item depending upon the salinity of seawater for rate corrosion is not to be considered in a class with a bridge chronometer, but this thing is now something like eight hours overdue. What's been your experience with these things, Cummings?"

Captain Cummings had his mouth open to respond when Crow called out, "Come right handsomely . . . uh . . . sir!" And there was a jug, practically scraping the planking.

Crow snared the line with a boathook and the commander muttered to the lad at the engine, "Astern, dead slow, son. We don't need that line wrapped around the wheel."

The lobster pot finally broke water and was lifted very carefully inboard. It contained, a tightly wrapped plastic supermarket shopping bag, and one large lobster.

"The lobster's mine!" cried Cummings.



Leaving Cadiz

by Philip McDonald

Around the time of the author Samuel Krosner's nervous breakdown, a businessman of Latin descent became a member of Rube's Gym and began a schedule of workouts. Joseph ("Or José. I hate Joe.") Ordoñez, a gentle and pensive sort, immediately hit it off with Gerald Dibbs, Rube's star bodybuilder and runner-up for the Mr. Earth title.

Ordoñez had the short, sturdy, well-proportioned frame of a Japanese gymnast. A slightly down-turned mouth and large, thoughtful eyes gave his dark features a look of perpetual sadness. This irritated Fletcher Langevin, a paunchy book editor, who dismissed

Ordoñez's face as the affected features of a Latin romantic.

"I cannot help the way I was born," Ordoñez would tell him.

"Then smile," Langevin growled.

Invariably Ordoñez would smile, prompting a disgusted Langevin to point his finger and exclaim, "Look, his mouth turns down even more when he smiles!" When this elicited an open-mouthed grin from Ordoñez, Langevin became more disgruntled: the newcomer's brilliant, even teeth reminded him of the deplorable state of his own.

"That reminds me," he would groan. "I have to go to the dentist next Wednesday."

Often, especially at the urging of Lazarro, Ordoñez spoke of the old country, Spain. Warren Lazarro was a restaurateur whose aging father also told him tales of the old country, always Italy.

"What do you care about Spain for? You're a dago," Wilbur Mattingly, an insurance investigator, would invariably razz him.

"The old country, any of the old countries, they are enchanting. People are close to one another, they have a sense of community," was one of Lazarro's stock replies.

"Yeah, that's why they come here."

These men were among a group of businessmen and officials who could be found going through their paces at Rube's Gym on Thursday nights. They worked out at other times as their schedules permitted, but had agreed that on Thursday nights they would make a special effort to exercise together and share the week's gossip. The unfortunate loss of Samuel Krosner left a gap that Joseph Ordoñez naturally filled. The police chief, Gordon Cordts, had always thought they needed new blood. They were getting inbred, he said.

Ordoñez was delighted by the idea. "A weightlifters' tertulia!" he exclaimed.

"A what?" said Cordts.

"A tertulia," replied Ordoñez. "In Spain and some Latin American countries men sharing a particular interest—sports, politics, religion, art—gather at a bar, club, or wherever to converse about that interest."

"See, I told you uncultured apes," said Lazarro. "The old country has charm, customs . . ."

"Latin America is the new country, ginso," interrupted Cordts.

"Well, at least it took an old-country man to trace the tradition of what we've been doing," Lazarro replied.

Some months after Ordoñez was accepted into the fold, Mattingly

found a note under a bench in the locker room. Old and creased, the note was in Spanish. He and Langevin tried to decipher it with only partial luck. They took it into the weight room where they thought Ordoñez could help them.

"Oh, my God, thank you," said Ordoñez, raising his eyebrows. "Where did you find it? Thank you, I would hate to have lost it."

"In the locker room," said Mattingly. "It wouldn't have been there long once Rube swabbed the decks tonight."

"Whoa, not so fast," said Langevin as Ordoñez placed the note with his towel on a windowsill. "We read part of it."

"Jeez, Fletch!" said Mattingly.

"Uh-huh." Ordoñez smiled gently at Mattingly, whose face was red with embarrassment. "I don't mind."

"Good," persisted Langevin. "Then maybe you won't mind helping us translate . . ."

"Drop it, goddammit," Mattingly shouted, and strode quickly to the lat machine.

For several minutes all that could be heard from the group was the clangor and clash of steel punctuated by the harsh rush of breath peculiar to those preparing to move heavy weights. But in the unaccustomed lack of badinage the room might just as well have been quiet as a cemetery. Gerald Dibbs was the first to break the silence.

"Sounds like we're getting some serious exercise here for a change."

"Yeah. It's a sound I don't like," said Lazarro as he began a set of calf raises.

"Of course," gruffed Cordts. "An Italian can't be happy unless he's spouting and waving his arms around."

Lazarro gestured as if to reply, but stopped as Ordoñez walked over to the lat machine where Langevin and Mattingly were spotting one another.

"I don't mind translating . . ." he began.

"Look, I didn't mean . . ." interrupted Langevin.

"It's okay. That note comes and goes in my mind for a long time now. I'll read it to you."

"Aha," said Mattingly, finishing his lat pulldowns. "Good."

Lazarro stopped what he was doing. Dibbs and Cordts continued exercising. Ordoñez fetched the note from his towel and returned to Mattingly and Langevin.

"José, my beloved boy," he began. "I accept your offer as a kindness that comes from the heart. I thank you deeply for it. I

have seen all of life. It has been an adventure, but I must advise you not to be as aimless and rootless as I have been. Do not go into old age without money, and do not go there alone.

"So much for advice. I am leaving Cadiz and will see you in Los Cielos. Most affectionately, Tío Joaquín."

"Who's that?" Lazarro said.

"My uncle . . . an old man. On my mother's side. As a boy I looked up to him; I still do. He was once as daring as any pirate. And would still be if he were not so old and infirm."

"Well, what did you do in Los Cielos?" Lazarro went back to his calf raises.

"Nothing," said Ordoñez as he stuck a pin in the weight stack of a cable pull against the wall.

"What do you mean, nothing?" Lazarro demanded in a voice made loud from the strain of his exercise. "Where the hell is Los Cielos, anyway?"

"North of Cadiz."

"What's there?" said Langevin.

"Nothing. Vineyards, olives, a bull ranch."

"Well, what the hell did the two of you do there?" Cordts, who had affected uninterest in the conversation up to this point, was exasperated by the turn it had taken.

"Nothing, he didn't come."

"Wait a minute." Mattingly held up his hand. "Everybody stop lifting weights. You too, Dibbs. If he didn't come like he said in the letter, then where . . ."

"May I suggest," said Dibbs, "that it's none of our business. After all, it was a private note that we came by accidentally."

"No, it's all right," said Ordoñez apologetically.

"Yeah, if it was none of our business he'd have told us from the start. Talk, go ahead, talk." Police Chief Cordts sounded as if he were interrogating a suspect.

"There's nothing more to say," said Ordoñez. "I didn't see him again. He may have come. I inquired in the village. Some strangers had passed through—not him, though. Then I had to leave for Sevilla on business. From there I contacted his pension in Cadiz, but they said he had left. I returned to Los Cielos for a week and found one old couple who barely remembered him. They doubted they would recognize him if he fell in their laps. Then I went to Cadiz looking for him."

"Did you go to the police?" Cordts said.

"Of course—and the Guardia Civil."

"Who?"

"Guardia Civil. Much better than local police at investigation—but with a reputation for brutality."

"Like the police here," interjected Lazarro, looking at Cordts.

"Keep it up, ginney, and I'll . . ." growled the police chief, bending over a heavy barbell.

"Cut it out, you two," said Langevin. "Joseph, didn't you think all of this was a little odd?"

"Yes and no," said Ordoñez. "When the police couldn't help, I began to think that my uncle had simply left—too proud to accept charity from me."

"But your Guardia Civil," said Mattingly. "He couldn't just disappear . . ."

"Ha, you don't know my Uncle Joaquín." There was a trace of pride in Ordoñez's voice.

Lazarro scratched his head. "But the letter says he accepts your kindness."

"Yes. It has me confused. I would like to know where he ran off to," Ordoñez said sadly. "It hurts to think he left me stranded in Los Cielos."

The clangor of weights, grunts, and hissing breath continued. The topic appeared to be exhausted. Yet the usual camaraderie was subdued among the weight lifting tertulia at Rube's Gym that Thursday night.

In the steam room after their workout, Langevin grabbed a roll of flesh at his waist and shook his head disgustedly.

"Stop eating so much," said Cordts.

"I wasn't looking for advice."

"Joe," said Mattingly, ignoring the interchange.

"José," corrected Ordoñez.

"Oops. Joseph, what were you and your uncle doing . . . I mean, what led up to that letter?"

"Yeah," said Lazarro, slipping quickly into the room and closing the door. "Move over, hulk," he said to Dibbs, "I want to hear this." The bodybuilder moved up a bench to make room for Lazarro.

"Well," began Ordoñez, "you will have to know that my uncle is a savagely independent Andalusian—they are a people noted for independence. He is hedonistic and adventuresome. And he's gone through some small fortunes, is widely traveled—much of it illegally—and could never settle down."

"Illegal, how's that?" Cordts asked.

"He thinks passports are suppressive. And that people should at

least have the rights that birds have, coming and going as they please. 'No one owns the earth,' he always says."

"So, you grew up with your uncle, or what?" asked Mattingly.

"Actually, I was born in Milwaukee. My mother took me back to Spain with her before I was able to talk. She spoke English with me, though. She was an English teacher. My uncle knew French, Italian, Portuguese, and Arabic. A little German, too. He drifted in and out of our lives, and I was always very happy when he came to Segovia to see us."

"How did he make a living?" Langevin wiped the sweat from his face.

"I don't know. No one did. He has very close friends in Malaga and Cadiz. They're tighter than the Sicilian mob and would do anything for one another. Anything. I was afraid of some of them—as old as they were."

"So what were you guys doing the last you saw him?" Lazarro moved down a step to avoid the steam near the ceiling.

"I was vacationing in Morocco when I heard from an old acquaintance that she had seen my uncle sitting outside a pension in Cadiz. He looked very old and weak, she said.

"I went there immediately. He had been sick, so I extended my vacation, took a room in the building, and cared for him. He recovered and proposed we have one grand fling. I thought him too weak, but he became angry with my mothering him. So we had the fling." Ordoñez filled his lungs with heat and exhaled slowly as he shook his head and smiled to himself. "Then I told him he was coming home with me—it would be no burden because I had more than enough for both of us."

"What was this fling?" asked Langevin impatiently.

"Oh, we tore up and down the coast, drinking and dancing and whoring around. I even got into a fight. Tío Joaquín loved it. We went swimming in the heat of the day—I did anyway, he mostly watched—and he found some old friends of his to take us out in their fishing boats at night. It was like when I was a kid. I always felt there was a great adventure close by when I was near him.

"But, as he told me one night, with adventure comes impermanence and, often, loneliness. I remember him saying that. We were drinking sherry on a patio behind a bodega. He didn't have to tell me that—I always knew I couldn't be like him. But he seemed as if he were drifting, talking about himself rather than advising me. Then he stood up suddenly and said, 'But there is still so much life to see, so let's go see it.' " Ordoñez began walking toward the door.

"Whoa, don't leave us just yet," said Mattingly. "How did it all end?"

"Phew, I can't take much more of this heat," said Ordoñez.

"Me either," said Cordts. "But you can't just leave us hanging."

"Well, eventually we returned to Cadiz. I was determined to take care of him, to take him home with me—and I wouldn't take no for an answer. Our little fling had left him exhausted and weakened. I had to admit he was a fragile old man." Ordoñez opened the door. "To the showers," he said. "I've had enough of this."

The six men plodded into the shower room where, through the hiss of water, they continued their conversation. Mattingly was first to question Ordoñez about what was still foremost on their minds.

"I don't mean to bother you any more about this, Joseph, but I'm going to, anyway. Why were you two supposed to meet in Los Cielos?"

"Oh, I had some business to attend to up north. And he wanted some time to take leave of his friends in Cadiz," said Ordoñez.

"There was also a special friend he wished to say goodbye to over in Los Cielos. Then, several days after we parted, the concierge at my hotel in Madrid gave me that letter you found. A man from the south had delivered it, but he left no name. And," said Ordoñez, shutting off his shower, "you know the rest."

"But how . . ." began Cordts.

"Enough!" said Lazarro, raising his voice. "Try not to feel too bad about your uncle's disappearance. He knows you love him . . . and you did everything you could."

"Thanks," said Ordoñez. "I think I did. But talking about it seems to help."

"You won't mind talking about it next Thursday, would you?" asked Cordts. "I've still got some questions . . ."

"No, no, it's okay," said Ordoñez, smiling. "The worst is over."

The men dressed and went their various ways. They had a whole week to cogitate on Joseph Ordoñez's strange uncle Joaquín.

On Thursday night of the following week Ordoñez was the first of the group to begin working out. With the exception of Gerald Dibbs, he always seemed to be there first. Mattingly quipped that the few times the bodybuilder tried to leave Rube's Gym he got lost. So he just gave up trying. As usual, Lazarro was the last to arrive, and talk about Ordoñez's uncle was already under way.

"We were close," mused Ordoñez. He was sitting on a low stool. Behind him, Mattingly prepared to hand him a barbell. "I imagined

we had a secret pact of friendship," he continued. "And he sympathized with longings that I would be embarrassed to divulge to others."

"Such as?" Cordts said.

"Mind your own business." Lazarro entered immediately into the conversation.

Cordts rolled his eyes upward. Ordoñez continued as if he hadn't heard this exchange. "When I found him in Cadiz, it was as if our old friendship had been infused with a new understanding. Those were happy times. He seemed to gain strength from the day we left the pension. I would look at his coarse silver hair and weather-rough old neck, and watch his eyes glitter just as they used to when I was a kid. He told me his adventure stories, too, just like when I was a kid."

"Here, take the bar," said Mattingly, "before I drop it." Ordoñez grasped the bar and pumped it behind his head.

"I'd like to know," said Langevin, "what your uncle's reaction was when you offered to take care of him."

Ordoñez finished his exercise, then stood up to spot for Mattingly. "It was in a bar in Cadiz," he said. "He looked at me a long while. I thought he was angry. Then he smiled and said I had a good heart."

"Was it easy for him to consider leaving Cadiz, and Spain? After all that is the old country, and America . . ." Lazarro said.

"Bah," said Cordts. "People just talk of the wonderful old country. Nobody wants to stay there."

"Bull," shouted Lazarro above the rattle of cables and weights. "My father loves to return . . ."

"Gentlemen," pleaded Mattingly. "We pressed Joseph to tell his story; let's have the courtesy to listen."

But Ordoñez was staring quizzically at Gerald Dibbs flexing his biceps in front of the mirror. "There's a crack in them," he mused.

"Mm-huh," murmured Dibbs. "Bi-ceps. Bi, meaning two. In each arm. The trick is to work each part independently to bring out that definition, the split."

Langevin disliked discussions of anatomy. "We were listening to an intriguing story here. Let's get back to it."

"Hey," Cordts said, "just because you're a physical wreck doesn't mean the rest of us have to ignore bodybuilding."

"Okay, okay," Langevin said, carrying a dumbbell over to a stool. "But Warren had a question . . ."

"That's right, I did," said Lazarro.

"To your question, Warren," said Ordoñez, "I can only tell you what my uncle said to me: that he had nothing keeping him in Cadiz—and he knew I would take him with me to the States. He's been here before. He and my dad drove around the entire country about a year before Dad passed away."

"You know, he might have given you the slip," suggested Mattingly, "when he realized he would have to leave his country."

"I thought of that, and I presented that problem to the Guardia Civil," said Ordoñez.

"If they're anything like the police in this country . . ." began Lazarro.

"They're not," said Ordoñez.

"What do you mean by that?" growled Cordts as he strained on the leg extension machine.

"They are much more efficient and thorough," Ordoñez smiled and grabbed a dumbbell.

"More so than the FBI?" Cordts' jaw jutted.

"Let's just say," chuckled Ordoñez, "that Patty Hearst would not have been lost for so long had she been in Spain."

"And what, may I ask, were the Guardia Civil able to do?" asked Cordts haughtily.

"They found that he had packed his few belongings at the pension and left. I had already paid his bill for the month, much to his annoyance. Also they found a woman who saw a man answering my uncle's description on the road to Los Cielos."

"So he *was* going to Los Cielos."

"The road, Gordon, also goes to many other parts," said Ordoñez.

"Oh."

"Could he have left the country?" asked Mattingly.

"He could leave whenever he pleased," said Ordoñez with a hint of pride. "He is adept at leaving and entering countries unbeknownst. But he wouldn't do that—he said he was coming to Los Cielos."

Cordts finished his last set of leg extensions and was red-faced with strain. He took a few deep breaths to control his breathing. "Could he have met with foul play?"

"No. I mean, I don't think so," said Ordoñez.

"Why not? He carried his personal belongings with him, including his money, I suspect," said Langevin.

"Not much," said Ordoñez. "He gave me the bulk of his money when I left for Madrid. He didn't want to be carrying it around with him, he said. Besides, he travels the world over by his wits,

and wouldn't have resisted robbers if they wanted his old suitcase. And if something had happened, the Guardia would have found something somewhere."

"Look," Cordts said, "there seems to me a certain vagueness in the letter that might well have been intended. He didn't say when he left Cadiz or, more important, when he was going to arrive in Los Cielos. Or, for that matter, where he would stay once he got there. Also he doesn't really accept your offer; just your kindness."

"I didn't question him," said Ordoñez. "He liked to be mysterious. And Los Cielos is quite small, a village. But what are you driving at?" Ordoñez looked at the police chief intently.

"That he created certain confusions simply to throw you off the track. You know. His purpose was to give you the slip."

"That is not so," said Ordoñez in a voice so adamant that the others stopped their exercises. "He is, above all, a man of honor," his voice was soft now. "And he would never lie to me."

"No, no. I'm not suggesting that he outright lied."

"He was not one to play games, either." Ordoñez stood stiffly, confronting the police chief.

"All right." Cordts backed down. "But I didn't get the impression that he was too enthusiastic about your taking him in. After all, you were the kid who once looked up to him—a hero of sorts."

"He's got something there," said Langevin. "I don't know if I'd like to be taken in, given a similar situation."

Lazarro slowly lowered his weights on a rack after doing a series of squats. "José is right," he said, breathing heavily. "In the old country, the aged have a great sense of honor. I don't think the old man would purposely steer him wrong."

"Thank you," nodded Ordoñez. "Besides, I know my uncle. I admit he was wrestling with my offer, but he finally agreed. If not, he would have said so. He is an outspoken man."

"I think," said Mattingly, "that we should at least consider whether he ever really cleared out of Cadiz. Couldn't he be hiding there?"

"Why would he want to hide?"

"Could he hide from the Guardia Civil in Cadiz?"

"Impossible," scoffed Ordoñez. "Besides, why would he want to hide?"

"For crissake, Joseph," said Cordts, "we're just trying to figure all the angles. I mean, let me concede that your police are the best there are—but they can't be perfect. If a man as smart as your uncle wished to lie low in a big city, I'm sure he could. After all,

you said he entered and left countries without carrying identification."

"I suppose . . ." Ordoñez said hesitantly.

Langevin rolled out from under the leg press machine, his rufescent face glistening with sweat and the ring of hair outlining his baldness sticking out like a clown's.

"You're using interrogation psychology, Gordon," Langevin reproved Cordts. "Catching him between pride for the Spanish police and pride for his uncle's worldliness and sagacity."

"I was like hell," Cordts seethed as he strained at the bicep curl machine. "Just trying to make an honest point."

"Then, when you've got him confused," continued the editor, "you're going to hit him with the obvious conclusion that he was rejected by his uncle, who would rather live a free old man in poverty than well off but frighteningly domesticated."

"But he would have written, he always did," said Ordoñez. "Even if he did as you suggested, Fletch, he would certainly have contacted me and explained. From somewhere—Tangiers, Ceuta, places he used to write from. I mean, it's been over two years." Ordoñez's voice was almost a plea.

"I think what Gordon had in mind," said Mattingly, "is how would you—after freely choosing and living a life that suited your every spiritual and emotional need—like to have that life taken from your own hands and have it controlled by someone else? Even if it was someone who loved you."

"I understand," said Ordoñez. "I have been fighting that thought . . . the rejection."

"Not a personal rejection," corrected Langevin. "Merely a rejection of a way of life in which he would have no control."

"Oh, but I never would have forced him . . ." began Ordoñez. But he did not finish what he was going to say.

"Yes, you would have," said Langevin. "You said you were determined to take care of him."

"You would not take no for an answer," added Cordts.

"I know. I put it to him that way only because . . . well, it was clumsy but I didn't know any other way to tell him how much I loved and respected him." Ordoñez looked at the others as if by way of appeal.

Dibbs stopped his exercises and, wiping his face with a towel, sat on a bench listening to them.

"But it leaves me with no more certainty than before as to his whereabouts," continued Ordoñez.

"And therein should lie some sort of satisfaction," said Langevin gently. "Your uncle's life was one of uncertainty, mystery. It remains that way. It is in keeping with your romantic view of him."

"But that makes me a little uneasy, Fletch," said Ordoñez, shrugging his shoulders. "Look at me, my way of life. I'm not really like my uncle. As much as I loved him and wished to emulate him, certainty and security were something that I came to accept as what I needed. Maybe I was stupid demanding the same of him."

"May I ask something?" Dibbs' gentle voice betrayed the sculpted bulk of his physique. Everyone turned to the bodybuilder as if they were surprised to see him there.

"What does Los Cielos mean, Joseph?" he said.

Ordoñez looked perplexed. "It's a village."

"No. If it were not a town. With small letters, does it mean anything?"

"The sky—*los cielos*—the blue sky," said Ordoñez.

"But it's in the plural," replied Dibbs.

"Well, yes, okay—the skies. Like 'fly the friendly skies.'"

"Or if it is used as we use it in English," said Dibbs, "the heavens."

"Same thing," said Ordoñez.

Dibbs received the intent stares of his companions. No one spoke. "And, as in English," the bodybuilder continued, "an expression for Heaven itself, the Heaven of religion."

"Yes," said Ordoñez, slowly nodding his head. "It could be used that way. Though mostly we say El Cielo."

"Uh-huh," murmured Dibbs as if talking to himself. "But that would have given it all away."

"What are you . . ." began Ordoñez slowly.

"Joseph, your uncle said he had nothing to keep him in Cadiz," Dibbs continued. "And yet he didn't go with you to Madrid or Los Cielos—but said he needed a few days to take leave of friends."

"It sounded normal enough at the time. I would not think of questioning his business."

"He also said he had a special friend to say goodbye to in Los Cielos. But your inquiries only unearthed some people who vaguely remembered him." Dibbs looked at Ordoñez, who was looking carefully back at him. "I think that special friend was you . . ."

"You think he is dead," said Lazarro abruptly. "But he is a man of his word, and he said he would meet José . . ."

". . . in Los Cielos," finished Dibbs, nodding his head. "For a man

who believed in Heaven, that would eventually be true. He told no lie."

"But how did he know he would die?" insisted Ordoñez.

"You must not take offense at my being frank," said Dibbs.

"No, of course not. I want to know what you are thinking."

"Suicide," responded Dibbs quickly. "With the help, perhaps of his friends . . . those who you said were like the Sicilians . . ."

"Yes, they made me uneasy. They seemed to talk with their glances," said Ordoñez. "But the police . . ."

"Would never have found him if his friends buried him in the country outside of Cadiz. This is all conjecture, of course."

"Yes, but go on," said Ordoñez.

"His note has the ring of last advice," continued Dibbs. "And he gave you practically all of his money. If he wished to run away it is not likely he would have done that. It all feels like a legacy of sorts, a poor man's will."

"But do you think that I caused . . ." began Ordoñez with a pained expression.

"No," said Dibbs. "He may have been planning it for some time, and you were a brief, happy interlude in his troubled considerations. In his note he said that he had seen all of life, yet during your fling he told you there is much more life to see. In the short time he spent with you he went from sickness to fleeting rebirth, and back to infirmity once more. He knew there would likely be no more rebirths."

Dibbs stood up and walked across the room. "I think Fletch is right," he added. "Your uncle was something of a mystery in life. And his death will also be a mystery because we cannot know for certain. But legends spring from uncertainty. That is their beauty."

The men exchanged glances and, without speaking, mulled over Dibbs' theory.

"I am leaving Cadiz," said Dibbs breaking the silence. "Maybe he has. Only his body may still be somewhere nearby. He hasn't written you because he can't." A trace of sorrow barely changed Dibbs' expression as he looked at Ordoñez. Then his face assumed a trance beyond pain as he positioned himself for his tenth set of repetitions in front of the angular steel bulk of the lat machine.

In the weeks that followed, levity and japing badinage returned to their workout sessions. None of them spoke again of the letter from Joseph Ordoñez's Uncle Joaquín.

FICTION

Lie Down with Dogs



by Bill Crenshaw

Illustration by Brian Battles

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Jake gave the pane a sharp pop and the glass fractured inward, hit the kitchen floor with loud shatterings. A good sign—the floor was real glazed tile, not some cheapo vinyl imitation. Real tile meant money. Great house, great neighborhood, big yards, lots of trees and shrubs, driveway curving around back—primo privacy. He brushed jagged shards out of the frame, reached through, and flipped the lock. “Keep it down,” he said to Frazz and Hammer. He wanted the job to run smooth, and he didn’t like the looks in their eyes.

Lorraine stretched, tensing muscles in her hips and thighs, arching back, relaxing. Couldn’t be morning yet, she thought. She turned her head on the pillow and saw Timmy beside her, thumb in his mouth, smile playing around the edges of his lips; asleep in a patch of early afternoon sun. Idiot, Lorraine thought, remembering. It was far from morning. It had already been one of those days. First the car dying in rush hour traffic, then the call from Timmy’s school. She had left work and brought Timmy home in a cab, sick on the day of the first grade field trip, or homesick, she thought. Not the adventurous type. Maybe she was overprotective. But he looked better now. She pulled his

thumb gently from his mouth. She had meant to stretch out only for a minute or two, quiet his crying, make him feel loved. She could have slept the whole day away. Thank God something had waked her, some noise on the edge of consciousness. What was it, she wondered. She stroked Timmy’s flushed cheek with the back of her fingers. Glass. Glass breaking. Oh my God. And now she could hear the voices.

They were too loud, Jake thought. You could tell they were brothers. Scuzbuckets, both of them. Amateurs. No class. The “Oh wow” boys, getting off on all the glitter, the copper pans hanging from ceiling beams, the little glass animals on the glass shelves in the window above the sink, a lot of “Hey, Hammer, lookit this, lookit that.” Hammer mostly grunted. Frazz was acting wired.

“Will you just shut up,” said Jake in his loudest undertone.

Frazz stopped his bouncing, froze rock still, in his hand a glass swan with a long and delicate neck. “Get outta my face, Jake-o.” He smashed the swan to the floor.

Jake locked pupils with Frazz. “You wanna do the job, or you wanna trash the place? You wanna trash, fine, I’ll see ya later, and you trash all you want because you’ll never do a

job again in this town."

Frazz sneered. "Who needs you?"

"You find this house?" said Jake. "You get the schedules? The van? You get these uniforms?" He thumped the "Buddy's Bugs-Away" patch above his pocket. His coveralls were white; theirs were blue. On them the distinction was lost. "You need me, I need you. Hammer?"

Hammer punched his brother on the shoulder. "Let's do the job, Frazz."

Frazz kept his eyes locked with Jake's as he smashed another glass figure to the floor. "Let's do it," he said.

Jake nodded and broke eye contact first to let Frazz think he had won a little victory. He wished he could have brought his regular crew. You lie down with scuzbuckets, he thought, you get up with scuz.

Lorraine inched to the banister and looked down between the rails, listening. Somebody *was* there, somebody in the kitchen. She jumped at a crash, a drawer of silverware hitting the tile, angry voices muffled by the closed swinging door. She held her breath, listening for Timmy, please, please don't wake up. Her lungs were on fire before she exhaled. Timmy was still asleep.

Call the police. She crept

back toward the bedroom, praying that the boards beneath her hands and knees wouldn't creak, not this time, not now. Then she heard Timmy bouncing, bouncing, using the bed as a trampoline, and she heard the voices in the kitchen stop.

"I don't hear anything," Jake whispered, ears straining.

"I did," said Frazz. "You said it was empty."

"It is empty."

"The hell."

Jake held up his hand and listened. He heard nothing. But if Frazz were right, they needed to get out now. He took the receiver off the wall phone and laid it on the counter. "Let's go," he said, jerking a thumb toward the door.

Frazz shook his head. "Let's check it out."

"Don't be a moron."

Frazz spread his face into a sort of smile. "Watch your tongue, there, Mr. Jake." He pushed through the swinging door. Jake swore under his breath and followed.

They *had* heard Timmy. They were coming upstairs. She held Timmy close, tight in her arms, easing into the bathroom, whispering, quiet, honey, it's okay, be very quiet. She moved in terrible slow motion, silence paramount, one foot behind the shower curtain, the ceramic cold

through her stocking, back on the wall for support now, ease around, second foot in, lay Timmy on the bottom of the tub, down on hands and knees and hunch over him, holding him, lips on his ears, the most quiet of whispers assuring, loving, pleading for silence.

She could hear them in the upstairs hall, trying also to be quiet, but loud, so loud. They were looking for her, for Timmy. Now they were in the bedroom. They would be in the bathroom next.

Frazz looked under the bed, rocked back on his knees, shook his head. Jake pointed to the bathroom. Frazz nodded, crept to the doorway, then kicked the door to smack anybody hiding behind it. It cracked on the wall like a whip. Frazz looked proud of himself. Idiot, Jake thought.

Hammer came in. "You got a kid's room and another bedroom. They all got bathrooms, man. You believe that?"

"Empty?" asked Jake.

"Yeah."

"Okay, then. Why don't you see what's in that jewelry box. Frazz, you check the drawers." He figured Frazz would like going through somebody's drawers. Keep him happy.

She could hear swearing, laughing, fabric ripping. Something heavy smashed and shat-

tered and a voice cursed somebody named Frazz. They had her jewels, she could tell that, and the camera, and the extra cash she kept under her panties, but she didn't care, her face wedged between Timmy's head and her arm, the tip of her nose touching the bottom of the tub. She sang lullabies to Timmy in whispers, her eyes clenched tight. *Go away*, her mind screamed. *God make them go away*.

And finally they were gone, the voices fading downstairs, into the dining room for the silver, or the den for TV, stereo, computer. Take them, she thought. All she wanted was the phone. She told Timmy to stay put, gave him a squeeze, and started out of the tub slowly.

Jake tucked the VCR under his arm. Expensive unit. And the television was a big component job, good bucks if Hammer didn't drop it. "Frazz, forget the tapes and help Hammer with the TV."

Frazz took the VCR from Jake. "You help him."

"Fine, right, let's just pick up the speed, okay? We're in almost eight minutes now."

"What's the sweat?" said Frazz.

You're the sweat, Jake thought. *You're trouble*.

It wouldn't work. It just made

the phone-off-the-hook noises. She dialed 911 again. *It wouldn't work.* Her muscles seemed to give up all at once and she sank to the floor, almost sobbing.

No. No, she had to get help. She forced herself up. She could go out the front window, hang from the ledge, drop into the soft flowerbed. Or out the guest room window and across the garage roof and down the tree, cut over to Tom and Edna's and call the police. But she couldn't take Timmy, and she couldn't leave him in the tub. She had to get him out of harm's way. The attic. The disappearing stairway was pretty quiet and downstairs they were being so noisy, they'd never hear. She went to the tub and picked Timmy up.

The three of them stood like statues in the middle of the kitchen, heads cocked at different angles. There was a click somewhere beyond the swinging door. Frazz looked at Jake.

Jake nodded. *I heard it,* he mouthed.

Frazz slid the VCR onto the counter and was through the door before Jake and Hammer could ease the TV down.

Lorraine kept her hand firmly on Timmy's rump, urging him up silently. He was scared, but doing so well, so well, just a few more steps, baby, keep going.

There was a voice behind her. "Hey, a chicky." Her head whipped around. A face looked through the rails, rising. "There's a chicky up here. Here, chick, chick, chick." He made little chirpy noises with a pursed mouth.

She gave Timmy a shove and scrambled up after him, the man laughing and calling chick-chick and coming after her, and other voices and heavy feet on the stairs, and the first man on the ladder. She grabbed a box and tilted it down the hole. The man yelled and she heard him stumble backwards down the ladder, fall, curse, heard his buddies laughing. She looked down, saw him sprawled at the bottom surrounded by the old dresses she'd meant to take to the Salvation Army. The other one in blue started up the ladder, and Lorraine lifted the end of Bob's long toolbox and slid it into the hole. There was a terrible crash and an even more terrible silence.

Jake could see right away that Hammer was dead, leg still caught and twisted in the rungs, neck bent just too far over. Then Frazz lost it, just freaked completely, screaming at her and charging into the attic. A jar exploded at the top of the ladder sending glass spinning, and the next one splintered on his head, the next

on his upraised arm, and more kept coming. He dropped off the ladder and grabbed a wrench and hurled it into the attic, cursing, then a screwdriver. He freed Hammer's leg, and then he slammed the ladder and the door up. He was still screaming at her.

Jake pulled at his arm. "Let's go, Frazz, go now." Frazz snatched his arm away. Jake grabbed it again. Frazz jerked free and pulled a knife. Jake backed away, palms up. "Fine, you stay."

"You leave," said Frazz, "I'll find you and feed you your liver."

Jake stopped.

"Get me a chair," Frazz said, bending to the tools. Jake went looking for a chair.

She still had her arm raised, Mason jar clutched in her hand. The attic door had slammed like a bomb, and now silence, silence. Had they gone? No, voices still there. Timmy was crying.

A sudden pounding, *boom-boom-boom*. It took a second for her to realize that they were nailing the door shut, sealing her in the attic. Now they could get away because she couldn't go for help. She started laughing. If she'd had the nails, she would have done it herself. She couldn't stop laughing.

The pounding didn't last long.

There were voices and other noises and then silence, a hard-edged, beautiful silence. She took Timmy in her arms and rocked him.

Then a shriek, a banshee wail, and Timmy leapt and screamed and crushed her neck in his panic, and her heart hammered at her ribs, she tried to loosen his grip, what was that noise, that . . .

Her nostrils flared. Something faint, acrid. And that noise . . .

The smoke alarm in the hall.

They'd set the house on fire. Then the attic alarm started its wail, and then there was the smoke, thick and yellow and roiling up to the peak in the attic roof, then rolling her way like a great formless snake.

She screamed, and Timmy screamed, and their screams were nothing against the ear-splitting horror of the alarm, and there was no one to hear. The smoke was thicker now, searing, biting. Timmy was crying and coughing, having trouble breathing. *I can't die this way*, she thought, couldn't let Timmy die this way, roasted, pieces of meat. She looked around the attic, studying the rafters beyond the central island of boards piled high with all those boxes they'd meant to go through. Timmy was going limp. *Not this way*. She clutched him to her and edged out, bal-

anced on two rafters, one foot on each. She reached a spot and looked around again, studied, and then with almost a little hop brought her feet together and, tucked in tight and tilting backwards, crashed through the ceiling beneath her.

Jake watched with the rest of the crowd across the street. A hot one, he thought. Good. He had heard the smoke alarm when he left, but halfway down the driveway, he'd heard nothing, and the streets were empty, and it was a normal afternoon in the suburbs. He had simply driven away, then circled back when the crowds had gathered.

The fire broke through the roof. He could feel the heat here, from sixty yards. The cops were moving the crowd back, and Jake backed up with the rest of them, just another rubberneck getting in the way. An overweight cop stopped in front of him, and he had to smile at the irony. If he only knew, he thought. Then he noticed a cop on his left. No use asking for trouble. He turned to his right to leave. There was a cop there, too. And then he

saw the cop behind him, and with him he saw the woman they had left in the attic.

In the squad car, his hands cuffed, the cops started working on him, where was his buddy, where was his buddy, meaning Frazz. She had told them about Hammer. He pretended they were glass.

"Oh, a tough guy," said one cop, mocking. "Leaves women and kids in attics. Know what she did? Figured out right where she was and dropped right through the ceiling and landed right in the bed. Broke every bedslat. Broke her collarbone. Nailed you, tough guy."

The big-bellied cop started the engine. "One dead," he said, "one running, and one stupid enough to come back and watch the fire. Where's your buddy, tough guy?"

"In your face."

The cop laughed. "We'll find him, sooner or later."

Sooner, thought Jake. As soon as you rake the ashes. Scuz-bucket was too dangerous to let back on the street.

Behind him the roof collapsed in a firestorm of smoke and flame and spark.

FICTION

Watch the Birdie

by David Justice



Illustration by Terrance Cummings

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So this one time, I'm sittin' at the window, lookin' out over the lean streets. Nothing moves. The sun slants down, gets just a little bit inside the canyon of the alleys, slops all over the sidewalks, hottens up the asphalt. And then a cloud passes over the sun.

I'm looking down, and I see a man, walking through the wrong part of town.

He takes a step, stops; looks around, moves forward, stops again. He looks down at the sidewalk, holds his chin. He wheels around, takes two steps, then he freezes, and spins back. He walks past my building, hesitates in front of the entrance, goes on, and then I lose him, 'count of the angle. But then he reappears coming back the other way, hesitates again, and goes in. Then I hear his footsteps coming up the stairs.

I straighten my T-shirt and get ready for a customer. He must be coming to me, 'cause all the other rooms are empty.

He appears in the open doorway, stops, and stares at me. I wave him in.

He's well-dressed, all right, better than I realized through the streaky window. Dark suit, shined shoes. I glance down at my beer-stained T-shirt, my cords with the dog-turd cuffs, then I realize that's not what

he's staring at. He's looking me right in the eye.

"Name?" he says, and I say, "Murphy," then do a double-take. He just come in here, and it's like *he's* the one sitting at the desk.

"Your sign says P.I."

"The sign does not lie."

"Can I trust you?"

"You'll have to."

"You're right."

He frowns, and bites his lip, like the idea is new to him, and he starts pacing in my office. Nervous guy.

But then he turns on me and says, with perfect self-control, "I need you to find a man."

I lean back in my chair and spread my hands. "Bread and butter to me. What's he done?"

"Drugs. Guns. And done it big."

I shrug. "So go to the police."

He snorts. "You know them as well as I do, in this town. Anyhow this case has a twist. The man's a diplomat, a foreign national. We're not sure how he fits in. But if we can prove he's here, we can get him on a visa violation — he's not posted to here. The whole thing's very delicate. We can't say at this point just who-all is involved. But you bring the local cops in, they'll be treading on the flowerbeds in no time."

"So what about the Federals?"

"We get enough evidence and they'll come in. All we have now are some tips and some leads, and a funny new pattern in the international traffic. You verify the suspect, things'll start falling into place."

"Hm. Still . . . something's fishy about this. You say he's pushing dope. Okay. By me, he can get his. But how do I know this isn't a personal thing; I find him, then you rub him out?"

"Because you let him go. It's not him we want specifically, it's the whole network, and he can lead us to it. All I need is a photo proving he's in this country, and the Feds take care of the rest. After you find him you can wait, if you want, forty-eight hours, whatever, until you tell me, time enough for him to blow. Sound good?"

"Guess so. Where do you fit in?"

His face hardens a little. "I'm with Interpol. We've been tracking this case for a year."

I got nothing else on the docket and it sounds like it could be interesting. I say, "I'll take the case."

He relaxes some and sits down.

"Your name?"

"Jeffers. Maurice Jeffers."

"His name?"

"That's what we don't know."

"You have a photo of him?"

"Unfortunately not."

"Description?"

"Almost certainly a diplomat."

"Yeh but, yeh but, I mean is he tall? short? dark, fat, what? Distinguishing marks, facial hair, and the rest."

"Mr. Murphy, you're missing the point. We don't have a picture, just a frame. We know the country he's coming from, we think we know what his game is, but we don't know *who*. He is 'X,' the unknown in the equation. We have the equation. You solve for X."

"X, huh. And you want me to find him."

"Right."

"X. Look, I think I'm missing a lot of things. I mean, I got guys come in here, want me to find someone disappeared over a year ago. Dames, want me to find their hubby what they ain't seen since breakfast. Find someone who turns out he's already dead. Find someone turns out he lives only in their head. *Eck setera, eck setera*. But you, you won't even tell me what he looks like, what his name is. Nothing."

"Something. I can tell you this." The stranger leans forward like a conspiracy.

"He has a love interest here in town. I think I know who it is. Stake her out, he'll walk into the trap."

Now it's me who's pacing. "And the dame, what, she would be—'Y'?"

He cracks half a smile. "No, her we have a little more on. The name we're not sure, though if she's using an alias that wouldn't be hard to find out. But that's unimportant. What's important is we have an address, the apartment where she keeps her love nest; and this is where Mr. X might come."

He hands it to me, neatly typed.

"Not a bad address," I say.

"She's got money. Or her husband does, or her boyfriends, or whatever. That doesn't matter. We do know that when she meets her men, she does it mostly mid-afternoons."

"Hm, sounds like she's married, or *they* are. Hey, though, this love nest used by any other broads? 'Cause I'd hate to be photographing the wrong guy."

"I don't know who else may use it; all the bureau told me was the address and what I told you. But they did wire a photograph. Quality's not too good, I'm afraid, but it's enough to tell you if you see someone else in there and it's not her. And you'll be seeing her in the flesh soon enough."

I study the photograph. A blonde, very tasty-looking, even in the smudgy black and white. Too bad she's poisoned bait.

"I'll get right on it," I say. "Give me a phone where you can be reached."

"That won't be necessary," he says. "I'll be in touch."

I drive around her neighborhood a while, get a sense of what the target will be walking into. Memorizing the lights, the blocked streets, the one-ways, in case I got to get out of there fast. If the guy's big in drugs and gun-running, chances are he'll be packing a gat. I want identification, not confrontation.

The apartment building itself is beautiful but bad news. Takes up a whole small block next to a park, and has entrances on all four sides. It looks like I'm going to have to catch him smack in her apartment. Come to think of it, I'd have to at least spot him there anyway, if I was to know who I'm looking for. Otherwise I'd have to just photograph every one of the dozens of people who went in and out of there every day, and do it round the clock, and if I missed even one, that might've been him.

Worse, I'd have to actually photograph him in there when I spot him. 'Cause otherwise he might go out a different exit from the one I was covering, or hang around and not leave till dark, and he might not be back.

After all he's a foreign national, might just be here on a quick trip and not be back for a month or more.

First problem is to locate 3G. It's a security apartment, you need a key to get in the building or else someone buzzes you up. You can always get buzzed in on some pretext or other, or follow on the heels of someone opening the door, but sometimes the party gets suspicious and alerts a guard. I want a low-low profile on this deal.

Opportunity comes early. A pizza truck stops outside the building and a guy gets out with a box. He goes over to the rank of buzzers and looks down at the box where the address and apartment number are written in pencil. I step forward. "Buzzer's on the fritz, so I came down to get it. What do I owe you?"

"Twelve bucks."

Oh good. Sounds like everything on it.

I pay him and tip him and he drives away. Why should he give it a second thought? Guy pays you for the pie as ordered, standing outside the locked entrance, must be the right guy and must have a key. And I do, but it's not the metal kind.

I buzz the number on the box, 7B. "Pizza delivery." It crackles back, "Come on up." The plate makes a noise like a

cicada and I open the door.

I keep the pizza with me, case anyone sees me prowling around and wonders about the unfamiliar face. Most faces are unfamiliar in these apartment places but I like the insurance. I add a couple little hooks to the penciled number and now it reads 3B. My ticket to the third floor.

It's big. The units on each floor use up most of the alphabet. I swing around and find 3G. It's on the side toward the park.

A party passes and looks at me with mild interest. I wear my moron look and stare down at the apartment number on the box. The party disappears into an elevator and I'm alone.

Hey, great idea. A "G" looks a lot like a "B," especially if you never got past the first few grades. If she's not in, I use my little open-sesame kit and case her apartment. If she's in—

She is, responding almost immediately to my soft knock. I'm kind of taken aback. Get the act together fast.

"Your pizza, ma'am. Twelve dollars, please."

She looks at me with surprise and distaste at being bothered for nothing. "I didn't order one."

I hook my head around like I'm looking at the metal numbers on the door that swung back, but really taking in the room beyond. "Isn't this 3G?"

"Yes . . ." Now she's craning her neck, trying to read the number upside down on my box. "But what you want is 3B."

"Oh, gosh, I'm sorry," I say.

Then she gives a little laugh and says, "Me too." 'Cause by this time the rich smell of cheese and sausage and all the rest is working its magic and she's wishing she'd ordered one. I get another idea.

"You know I *thought* it said 'B'; you never can tell with Paco's scrawl—he's the guy that handles orders to the kitchen. But when I tried it, no one was home."

She looks startled. "Then how'd he ring you in?"

Good thinking. I match it with one of my own, like in checkers. "He didn't. I just followed in behind another delivery man."

She looks thoughtful. "So it could be *anyone* on this floor."

"Well, or any floor. Maybe the 'B' is right and the '3' isn't."

She laughs again at my plight, and my hapless look.

"You *have* got a problem. You can't go knocking on every door in the building. It'll get cold. In fact you're better off not knocking at *any* wrong doors. I'm sorry I almost snapped at you earlier, but there have been some burglaries, and the building has got awfully security-conscious. It sort of rubs off on

everybody. Some of the women especially, they're worried about burglary and—worse. Some of the tenants might greet you at their doorway with a gun."

Her saying "gun" brings me back to my senses. She seems so nice I'd almost forgotten I was dealing with the floozie of a drug kingpin and international arms smuggler. So I hush up my conscience and push the fraud another notch.

"Just my rotten luck," I say with my most crestfallen expression. "Well, it won't be the first time."

Her face melts. "Do they dock you for it?"

"Half the price of the pie."

"That isn't fair! It was the fault of the man who wrote the order."

"Well, not necessarily. The caller might've said it wrong, or said it right but they had a bad connection. And the boss takes half the loss."

"Well, I tell you what I'm going to do," she says, determined. "I was just thinking of lunch myself, and a pizza sounds scrumptious. What did you say, twelve?"

"Aw, heck, it's pretty cold by now. You can have it for half price."

"That's nice of you, but you know you'd still be out six dollars, because your employer is expecting twelve."

I sort of squint up my eyes, then nod, like I'm just figuring it, I'm not too bright.

"Come right in," she says. "Put it on . . . oh, the coffee table." And she gives me twelve bucks plus a tip.

"Gee, thanks a lot. You got a microwave? It's not too bad heated up."

I know she doesn't because I already noticed this apartment doesn't come with a kitchen. Either she eats all her meals out or she doesn't need a kitchen 'cause she's only here occasionally, for the trysts.

"No, I . . ." she stammers. "But it will be all right."

I thank her and touch my head where the hat would be, and then she laughs again. "I don't know what I'm going to do with all this pizza," she says. "I eat so little."

"It's a large."

She looks at me thoughtfully. "Do you get yours free?"

"Are you kidding? The boss we got? Pay the same price as any other customer."

That does it for her. "Here. Join in." So I sit on her sofa and share the meal.

It sort of sticks in my throat. I keep thinking of another guy that broke bread with this other guy that he'd already sold out. But I keep reminding myself that she's the moll of some hardened pusher and gun-run-

ner who's probably ordered about a dozen guys killed. I bite down hard on the crust.

"My, you *are* hungry," she says, with laughing eyes.

From where I sit, I can see the bedroom, and if I weren't here on false pretenses and if I didn't know she was hooked up with a killer, I'd be wondering what we'd both look like in there. She's dressed modestly, but everything she's wearing is so soft you just ache to stroke it. I'm feeling more and more like a heel.

As though reading my thoughts, she colors slightly. "My mother would just die if she knew I let a strange man in. But then, she'd just die if she knew I was here." She colors deeply and hangs her head.

"I—I—I'm sorry, I—"

"No, *no*," she says, looking up, her eyes a little misty. "It is I who should apologize for embarrassing you, you good person, you decent man. I mean, the way you stuck up for Paco and, and thought of the loss, the *trivial* loss incurred by your tight-fisted boss . . . Oh! Don't ever let anyone look down on you because you're just a delivery man, because—oh I'm sorry about that 'just,' no, it's wonderful what you do. I mean, it's a clean, honest living you make, bringing food to people who are hungry."

By this point my soul, like a slime-dwelling amphibian exposed to the light, has shriveled into a little ball.

"Because there are some people," she says, putting her hand on my wrist, "who earn a much 'better' living in a much worse way. I know," she adds bitterly, "from personal experience."

So it's true! Her boyfriend's a gun-runner, a dealer of drugs.

And she's regretting it! I can't help it, I just burst out:

"Why don't you leave him? Go straight!"

She hangs her head. "How can I, when he's my husband?"

"Your—husband?" This is worse than I thought. "You could separate."

"And live on what? He wouldn't give me a cent. I have no training for work."

I don't believe in divorce. But . . .

Again as if reading my mind.

"And he'd never grant me a divorce—unless on terms so prejudicial he could get away with little or no alimony. He needs what he has to support his mistress, and to pay his gambling debts."

Boy, this guy is sounding worse all the time.

Just then the buzzer sounds from downstairs. She speaks mutedly into the mouthpiece: "Yes?" A muffled reply. She buzzes him in.

"You'd better go now," she says, a note of sorrow in her voice. "I don't know why I told you all this. Just your honest face, and—the fact that you're a stranger, and the need for anonymous confession. You don't know me, you know nothing about me, not even my name, and you'll pass from my life . . ." She gives me a chaste parting kiss on the cheek, and says, "I'm sorry for what I've done."

I step out the door, and as I do, I hear her murmur to herself: "But there can be no forgiveness, for I am doing it again."

My face is burning as I walk back to the elevator. The kiss stings. At least it was her who kissed me and not vice versa—remind me too much of that guy who kissed the guy.

I push the button for the elevator but it opens immediately and a man steps out. Middle-aged, medium build, an ordinary face. You'd never know it, to look at him . . . I watch, standing stock-still in the elevator, as he goes to 3G and knocks.

The elevator sinks, and me with it. How could she marry a guy like that? Maybe she had no idea what he does; you can't read it right off his face. I hate what I have to do now, but in a way it is almost a favor to her.

They'll identify him and send him upriver. Then she'll be free.

I go to the car and get the camera. Being inside gave me a good layout of the place. They'll probably draw the curtains before they do anything, even though there are no windows facing others and they overlook the park, but I could see the midline where the drapes don't quite meet, and beyond it a tree.

The park is empty, the bushes are thick, the treetops dense with leaves. I shinny up and position myself out on a branch, just a few feet away from her window.

It is not a pretty position to be in. I feel like one of those slimeball peepers. I gotta keep telling myself this is for a good cause. You don't catch Al Capone by just asking him please to come clean.

The drapes are drawn, but the windows are open, and I can hear them talk. Well, hear her. His voice is subdued, hers distraught.

"... it's just, the incredible *dishonesty*..." and then her voice falls. Her dress passes by the chink in the drapes.

"... *real* estate, they should call it *unreal* estate, this incredible *shell* game..." She passes by the other way, and this time she's not wearing a dress.

His hand goes up, holding a cigarette, then stubs it out.

She lies down full-length on the bed, perfect view, and reflexively I get a shot of her, though he isn't in the picture yet. Then he lies down on top of her and there's just his back.

The next twenty minutes are among the worst in my life. That's how long it takes to get a decent photo of him, or enough decent partial views to piece together into one man. They'd turned off the overhead lights and there was only the lamp on the nightstand. I snap and snap as their bodies roll in and out of shadow, getting a sliver here, a sliver there, more when the breeze would part the curtains.

Finally they just lie there, unmoving. I climb down, stiff, drenched with sweat and self-disgust. Then I pull back with some establishing shots, to prove where the apartment really is: the window; the window and the wall; the building; the building and a street sign; the street. After all, it won't help the visa people if he's just photographed fornicating somewhere in France.

I get back to my apartment and the phone rings almost instantly, like it knew I was there. I answer, and my voice is hoarse.

"How'd it go?" he says, sounding jolly.

"I got the goods." I wonder if

I sound as rotten as I feel.
"Fine, fine, I'll be right over."
He's as good as his word.

He checks through the photographs, one by one down the stack, smiling wryly and sometimes pausing and chuckling over one. My ears burn.

"It's the best I could do. He had his back to the lamp, his face was half in shadow the whole time. And here he had his hand up; and here he's buried in her hair. Good enough if you already know him, I guess, but not the best stuff for Interpol if he's not who they thought and they're trying to pick out a suspect out of a pool of possibles covering two continents."

"It'll do fine," he says, smiling, handing me a check. "It's quite clear enough to show he isn't me."

The world goes dark. I freeze in my tracks. "Isn't *you*? Wha-
daya mean? I mean—"

"And the photo is really excellent of my wife."

"Of your *wife*?"

"Yes. Thanks for your help, Mr. Murphy. This should stand up just fine in court."

He's put on his hat and he's walking out the door and I'm screaming at him, tearing up the check.

"What is this? I don't do divorce cases! I don't do divorce cases!"

"You just done one," he says.

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

The order in which locked rooms and key rooms must be visited is Start, TC key, SR key, TC key, Storeroom, C key, Storeroom, Crypt, L key, Crypt, Storeroom, Laboratory, A key, Laboratory, Storeroom, Crypt, Archives, Torture Chamber, Finish. Some sections of the correct path must be retraced several times.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Green Scarf

by A. M.
Burrage



Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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When the Wellingford family became extinct the days of Wellingford Hall as one of the great country houses of England were already numbered. The estate passed into the hands of commercial-minded people who had no reverence for the history of a great house. The acres surrounding the hall became too valuable as building sites to be allowed to remain as a park surrounding a country mansion. So the fat Wellingford sheep were driven elsewhere to pasture, and surveyors and architects heralded the coming of navvies and builders.

All this happened many years ago. The old park became crossed and crisscrossed by new roads, and perky little villas with names like "Ivyleigh" and "Dulce Domum" sprang up like monstrous red fungi. Even these have since mellowed, and grown their own ivy and Virginia creeper, and put on airs of respectable maturity. The Hall itself, forlorn and abandoned, like some poor human wretch deserted in his old age, began slowly to crumble into decay.

Wellingford Hall was no more than an embarrassment to the new owners of the estate, who were willing to let it or sell it at the prospective tenant's or purchaser's own price; but to dispose of a great house with no land attached to it and surrounded by a garden city is no easy matter. It was too big for its environment. After some vicissitudes as a private school and the home of a small community of nuns, it was abandoned to its natural fate: "for," said one of the directors of the Wellingford Estate, Limited, a gentleman not above mixing his metaphors, "what was the sense of keeping a white elephant in a state of repair?"

Three years before this present time of writing came Aubrey Vair, the painter, as poor as most other painters, a lover of old buildings and all the cobwebby branches of archaeology, and took Wellingford Hall at a weekly rental of fewer shillings than might be demanded for the use of a gardener's cottage. He knew one of the directors, and he had discovered that a few rooms in the middle of the block of buildings were still inhabitable. The directors, I suppose, wondered why anyone should wish to live in the damp-ridden, rat-riddled old hole, but they did not despise shillings, and they let him come.

Vair wrote me several letters, begging me to come down and rough it with him. It was just the place for a writer, he assured me; it would give me ideas. He had been searching after priests'-holes and had discovered no less than five. One of the great rooms made the finest studio he had yet painted in. And really, as regards

comfort, he avowed, it wasn't so bad, so long as one came there already warned to expect only the amenities of a poor bachelor establishment. And then, he added temptingly, there were the historical associations.

I already knew something about the latter, having discovered my facts in a book dealing with old English country houses. Charles the First had spent a night there during the Great Civil War. Charles the Second was supposed to have hidden there after the battle of Worcester. But best of all was the romantic tale of the capture and execution of Sir Peter Wellingford in 1649.

Briefly, Sir Peter was a proscribed Royalist who lived hunted and in hiding after the failure of the royal arms. A wiser man would have crossed the Channel, but Sir Peter had a young wife at Wellingford Hall. He had often visited her in safety, and might have continued to do so, but for a traitor in his own household. This fellow, so the story went, betrayed his master by waving a green scarf from one of the windows, this being a prearranged signal to inform a detachment of Parliamentary troops that the head of the house was secretly in residence. The soldiers burst in at night, and ransacked the house before Sir Peter Wellingford was discovered in a hiding-hole—or "privacie" as the old chronicle described it. The cavalier was dragged outside and shot in his own courtyard.

Here was a story romantic enough to inveigle the fancy of most men with a grain of imagination. I fully intended to visit Wellingford Hall, but circumstances caused me to defer my intention for the first summer and it was not until the following May, when Vair had been in residence for a full year, that I paid him my deferred visit. I journeyed by road, driving myself in my small two-seater, so that Vair had no opportunity to meet me, and I had my first view of Wellingford Hall before I could be biased by his enthusiasm.

Holy Writ speaks of the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not; and here was this grim, forbidding, crumbling old ruin still surrounded by its moat and standing in the midst of jerry-built "Chumleighs" and "Rosemounts." It was like finding the House of Usher in the middle of a new garden city. In spite of its moat the Hall had never been intended for a fortress and the bridge I crossed must have been nearly as old as the house itself.

Vair heard me coming and pushed open the great nail-studded door under the archway of the main entrance to come and greet

me with a grin and a handshake. He climbed up beside me and directed me round into the yard, where there was plenty of accommodation for a dozen cars. Strangely enough, the stables and coach houses were in better repair than the old house itself.

The hall had once been magnificent, but most of the ceiling was gone, and the oak balustrade of the staircase, having a commercial value, had been long since removed. A trail of sacking across broken paving stones pointed the way to Vair's apartments beyond. He ushered me into a fine room, in quite a reasonable state of repair, furnished with products of his speculations at country auctions. Although the month was May the weather was none too warm, and I was glad of the sight of the log fire which lent the room an additional air of comfort. Vair laughed to hear me exclaim, and asked if I were ready for tea.

He lived there, he explained, entirely alone, except that a char-woman came each morning to do the rough work and cook his one hot meal of the day.

"You won't mind putting up with cold stuff and tinned things of an evening?" he asked anxiously.

I hate tinned foods but, of course, I could not say so.

After tea Vair showed me the rest of the rooms which he had made habitable, and, really, he had managed to make himself much more comfortable than I had expected. He had contrived—Heaven knows how—to learn a lot of intimate history of the old place, and knew the name by which every room had been called in the house's palmy days of dignity and prosperity. My bedroom, for instance, was known as "Lady Ursula's Nursery," although history had long since forgotten who Lady Ursula was.

It was easy to see that Vair had a boyish enthusiasm for the place. He was a queer chap, with more than the average artist's share of eccentricities, and he believed in all manner of superstitions and pseudo-sciences. He was one of those ageless men who might have been anything in the twenties, thirties, or forties. I happened to know that he was nearly fifty, but his thin wiriness of figure and boyish zest for life kept him youthful. Obviously his pleasure at having me down was not so much for my own sake as his. I was somebody to whom he could "show off" the house. He was clearly as proud of it as if it had been restored to its former dignity and he were the actual owner.

"For Heaven's sake, don't go about the place by yourself," he said, "or you'll break your neck. I've nearly broken mine a dozen

times, and I'm beginning to know where it isn't safe to walk. It must be rather rare to find damp-rot and dry-rot in the same house, but we've got both here."

I promised faithfully that I wouldn't move without him. Even the main staircase did not appear too safe to me, but Vair assured me that it was all right.

After tea he took me over such parts of the house as it was safe to visit, but I shall make no attempt to describe most of this pilgrimage. My memory carries dreary pictures of damp and decay, of dust and dirt, and cobwebs, mouldering walls, and crumbling floors. The old place must have been a warren of secret rooms and passages, and he showed me those he had discovered. All I can say is that the refugees of the bad old days must have been very uncomfortable, and those who escaped deserved to.

One large room under the roof, which we visited, had once been a secret chamber. It was called the Chapel, and here Mass had been said in defiance of the law throughout part of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

"There must be a lot more secret rooms," Vair remarked. "Little Owen, who was a master at constructing such places, is known to have spent months here during the reign of Elizabeth. The house was always being raided, and the raiders had little satisfaction."

"They got the poor old cavalier," I laughed.

"Oh, yes. But he was given away, or sold, by a servant. I've shown you the place where I'm almost sure he hid—behind where the bed-head used to be in the room called the King's Chamber. We'll see if we can find some more while you're here, if you like."

It suddenly occurred to me that Vair had always called himself "sensitive," or psychic, and it was perhaps natural of me to put on the noncommittal smile of the polite skeptic and inquire if he had seen any ghosts. Rather to my surprise, he shook his head.

"No," he answered; "it isn't at all that kind of place. The house is quite friendly. I should have felt it at once if it had been otherwise."

"But I should have thought with its history—"

"Ah, it's seen troubled days, but they were always nice people who lived here. There are no dreadful legends of bloodshed and cruelty."

"There is the story of the cavalier," I objected. "Surely his ghost ought to haunt the place."

"Why? He is a good man from all accounts and he died a man's

death. Only troubled or wicked people linger about the scenes of their earth-life. When he was taken out and slaughtered, all the hatred and blood-lust came from *outside*. If any impressions of those spent passions remain, they're not inside the house, and I don't want them inside."

I smiled to myself, knowing that, from Vair's point of view, the house *ought* to be haunted, and his excuses for the nonappearance of a ghost or two struck me as ingenious but farfetched.

"That's a pity," I said, tongue in cheek. "I quite hoped to be introduced to a Grey Lady or a Spectre Cavalier."

He frowned, knowing that I was laughing at him.

"Well, you won't be," he said, "unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Well, unless something happens to alter present conditions. If, for instance, we were to find something which someone long forgotten desired should remain hidden."

"I see."

"I doubt if you do. And I doubt if anything could be done now to disturb any of the Wellingsfords in their long sleep. They seem to have been an ideal family; I haven't been able to find a word of scandal on any page of their history. Where there has once been bitterness and hatred, there you may look for ghosts. There was none here. All that came from outside. That frenzied desire, for instance, to trap and kill a man because he had fought for his king, long after his cause was well lost; that bitter bigotry which sought to prevent folk from worshipping according to their consciences. It all came from outside, I tell you!"

Vair's voice had risen. Like most men with no particular faith, he respected all creeds, and religious intolerance always moved him to violent anger. Respect for his deadly seriousness kept my face grave.

"Do you mean just outside?" I asked.

"How do I know? And so long as they remain outside what does it matter? I assure you, I don't want them brought in."

To my relief, he then veered away from a subject which was hardly within my scope of conversation. There was little of the mystic in me. All the same, when at last I retired to bed in Lady Ursula's nursery, I was glad to remember that Vair had given the house a clean bill of health in the psychic sense. By the time I had been Vair's guest for twenty-four hours I had begun to feel with him that the old ruin had a kindly and friendly atmosphere, in spite of its apparent gloom, and that this might have been the

legacy of good people who had lived and died within its walls.

At the risk of giving this narrative an air of being disconnected, I must pass hurriedly over the next two or three days of my visit, for they brought forth little that is worth recording. Sometimes Vair did a little painting, and then his preoccupation drove me to my own work. We did a little fishing and sometimes walked three-quarters of a mile to the Wellingford Arms where, according to Vair, who accounted himself an expert, the bitter beer was better than the average. Sometimes we risked our necks on rickety stairs and crumbling floors, looking for more secret hiding places, an occupation in which I soon became infected with some of Vair's schoolboy zest.

The place was quiet enough during the day, but the villas and bungalows which had marched almost to the edge of the moat made themselves audible at night. Every Lyndhurst and Balmoral seemed able to boast of a musical daughter or a powerful gramophone. The effect of sitting in one of those dignified old rooms with the windows open and hearing echoes from the musical comedies was grotesque in the extreme. Vair had evidently grown used to it, for he made no comment.

I had arrived on a Saturday, and it was on the afternoon of the Tuesday following that, between us, we made a discovery of historical interest; a discovery which we came afterwards bitterly to regret having made. We were on the first floor landing, where long windows, deep in a recess, looked out over the Wellingford Park estate, when Vair mentioned that he had never examined the window seats.

"Sliding panels," he said, "certainly have existed, but they belong mostly to fiction. They were too hard to construct and too easily discovered. Take the five hiding places you've seen in this house. Three of them are behind fireplaces, one under the stairs, and the other must have been masked at one time by the head of a bedstead. Window seats were very often used, and this one looks likely. Let's try it."

We rapped it with our knuckles, and although it did not sound hollow, there was obviously an empty space beneath it. We pushed and tugged and teased the surface of the wood with our fingers. And suddenly I saw a crack widen, and part of the seat which had fitted into the rest of the woodwork as neatly as a drawer came away in my hands, and we stared at each other with laughter and curiosity in our eyes.

"Hallo, what's this!" Vair exclaimed.

The cavity disclosed was very small. It was obviously not the entrance to any place of concealment capable of holding a human being. I lit a match and thrust it down into the darkness. Then cheek by jowl we peered together into a cavity no more than three feet deep.

"Nothing here," I said, breaking cobwebs as I moved my wrist to and fro.

"Isn't there!" exclaimed Vair.

He brushed me aside and his arm disappeared up to the shoulder. His hand was black when he drew it forth, and an end of something like a black rag was between his fingers. It was an old piece of silk, so rotten with age that it almost crumbled under our touch; but when we had blown on it and brushed it with our fingers we saw that it owed its present color to the dirt of ages, and that it had once been green. On the instant the old tale leaped into the minds of both of us, and we exclaimed together:

"The Green Scarf!"

I forget what we said for the first minute or two. We were both excited and elated. There is some peculiar pleasure, difficult to analyze or explain, in discovering a relic which serves to corroborate some old tale or passage of ancient history. We neither of us doubted that we had discovered the green scarf by which Sir Peter Wellingford had been betrayed nearly three hundred years before.

"The traitor must have kept it here in readiness," said Vair, his eyes dancing. "And when he'd signalled, he dropped it back again, and there it has lain from that day to this."

"And most likely," I added, taking the relic from his hands, "this is the very window he waved from."

The window was open and I leaned out and let the dingy rag flutter from my hand in the warm afternoon breeze.

"Don't!" said Vair sharply, and pulled me back.

The silk was so rotten with age that even the weak breeze tore it slightly, and I thought at the time that Vair's sharp "Don't!" was uttered because of the damage I had unwittingly done. It was a relic of treachery and bloodshed, but we both regarded it with a queer sort of reverence, as if it were associated with something sacred.

I should think an hour must have passed before we mentioned anything else. We were both agreed that one of us should write to a newspaper announcing our discovery and that the scarf should

be cleaned by an expert and offered to a museum. One remark of Vair's struck me at the time as a little strange, but the full force of it did not come to me until some hours later.

"I wish you hadn't waved it out of the window," he said. "It's what that damned traitor did. That's what made you do it, of course—trying to re-enact part of an old tragedy."

"I don't see that it matters," I returned lightly. "Nobody saw."

He turned on me at once.

"*How do you know?*" he demanded sharply.

I could not help laughing then.

"My dear fellow," I exclaimed, "are you afraid that the wife or daughter of one of your neighbors will think—"

"I wasn't thinking of *them*," he returned curtly. "When that rag was waved out of that window nearly three hundred years ago, you know what happened, you know what it brought into the house."

I thought I had caught the drift of his meaning. Vair had always declined to walk under ladders or make the thirteenth of a party, and he was unhappy for days after he had spilled the contents of a salt-cellar.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Vair," I begged. "If there's any ill luck about, I give it leave to attack me and leave you alone."

He did not answer, and in a few minutes the incident had passed temporarily from my mind.

I have tried to tell this story so many times by word of mouth, and been compelled at this point to pause and hesitate, as now I am compelled to pause and think. It is not that my memory fails me; memory, indeed, serves me all too well. But hereabouts I am brought to realize the failure of my small command of words. A bad speaker can at least convey something otherwise unexpressed by look, gesture, hesitation, tone of voice. But with nothing but pen, ink, paper, and a limited vocabulary, I see little chance of giving an adequate account of what happened to us that night; of how with the twilight depression was laid upon us, straw by straw, and how with the coming of darkness horror was laid upon us, load by load.

Even before supper I found myself restless and ill at ease. Something began to weigh upon my spirit as if my mind carried the knowledge of some ordeal which I had presently to face. Of course I put it down to an attack of "liver" and made up my mind to forget it. The intention was good, but it was unjustified by the desired result.

My discovery that Vair was suffering from a similar *malaise* did not help my own case. His spirits were far below normal, and I think our mutual discovery that the other was "below form" added weight to that which was already dragging at our hearts. To make matters worse we each began to act for the other's benefit, to force laughter, to crack heavy jokes, and make cumbersome epigrams. But when at twilight we lit the lamp and sat down to supper we tacitly agreed to give up pretending.

"Do you feel that there's a weight crushing you whenever there's thunder about?" Vair asked suddenly.

I was glad to think of some excuse to account for my mood, and answered quickly:

"Yes, very often. And I wouldn't mind betting there's some thunder about tonight."

Vair looked at me and seemed suddenly to change his mind over what he had been about to say. He shook his head.

"The glass hasn't gone down."

I rose from the table without apology, went to the window, pulled aside the curtains, and looked out. It was just after sunset on a very perfect May evening. There was a red glow in the west, and around this glow there was an area of sky which was almost apple-green. This merged into a very deep blue in which one or two pale stars were already beginning to play hide-and-seek.

"No," I agreed grudgingly, "there isn't a cloud in the sky. Still, storms come up very quickly."

"Yes," said Vair, "and so do other things."

My lips moved to ask him what he meant, but I thought better of it. Whatever morbid imaginings he might be entertaining, they were scarcely likely to help my own mood. We ate in silence, continuing thus for a long time before I forced a laugh and exclaimed:

"Well, we're a jolly pair, aren't we? What the devil's the matter with us this evening? I only wish I knew."

"I only wish I didn't think I knew," he answered strangely.

"Well, what do you think—"

"I think we ought to go out somewhere tonight and stay out."

"Why? You haven't felt like this before—"

"No. And it's because I haven't felt like this before—"

He came to another sudden pause, and we looked into each other's faces for a moment before he lowered his gaze.

"Now, look here," I said, trying to keep my voice steady, "let's be as honest as we can and try to analyze this thing. I'll say it first. We're both afraid of something."

He went a step further.

"We're both afraid of the same thing," he said.

"Well, what is it, then? Let's find it out and confront it. When a horse shies at a tree, you lead him up to it and show him that it's only a tree."

"If it happens to be a tree or something like a tree. But if it isn't . . . Look here, let's go out. Straight away now, while there's time. They've got bedrooms at the Wellingford Arms. Let's go and spend the night there."

With all my heart I wanted to. But Pride borrowed the voice of Reason and spoke for me.

"Oh, don't let's make fools of ourselves," I urged. "I for one don't want to truckle to my nerves. If we give way like this once, we shall always be doing it."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's have a drink."

He brought out the whisky. I am a temperate man with a weak head for spirits, and I admit that I exceeded my usual allowance, but it made no more difference to me than if it were water. We sat facing each other gloomily in a silence which became increasingly difficult to break.

The unusual quality of this silence had already begun to impress me when Vair mentioned it, as if my thought had communicated itself to him.

"Don't you notice how extraordinarily still everything seems?" he asked presently.

"Yes," I agreed, and snatched suddenly at a straw. "The silence before the storm. There is a storm about, you see."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "It isn't that kind of stillness."

And then, with a little leap of the heart and a tingling of the nostrils, I suddenly realized a fact which seemed to me inexpressibly ugly. This stillness was not the hush of Nature before some electrical disturbance. For some time past we had heard no sound at all from the outer world. The gramophones and pianos in the little houses around us were all silent. It was the hour when at many houses on the estate hosts and guests were parting for the night, yet there was not the faint echo of a voice, nor the comfortable workaday sound of a car droning along a road. It may seem ludicrous, but I would have given a hundred pounds just then to hear the distant shunting of a train.

Vair rose suddenly, went to the window and looked out. I followed

him. For some while now it had been completely dark. Overhead in a very clear sky the stars looked peacefully into our troubled eyes.

"No storm about," said Vair shortly.

He heard me catch my breath, and a moment later he was aware of what I had already perceived.

"Look! There aren't any lights! There isn't a light anywhere!"

It was true. The hour was not late, and yet from the rows of houses which began not so many yards distant, not a light was visible, nor was it possible to discern an outline of roof or chimney against the sky. We had been cut off from the lights and sounds of the outside world as completely as if we were in a cavern miles under the ground, save that our isolation—I can think of no other word—was lateral.

Vair's voice had risen high and thin. He made no effort to disguise the terror in it.

"There must be some fog about," I said; and I was so anxious lest my voice should sound like Vair's that I spoke out of the base of my chest.

"Fog! Look, man!"

I looked. Truly there was not the least sign of fog or mist. Until we raised our eyes to the sky we stared into impenetrable, featureless darkness.

Vair let the window curtains fall from his hand. He turned to me in the oppressive stillness, and his face worked until by an effort he controlled the muscles.

"Try and tell me," he said hoarsely, "*what* you've been feeling all evening."

"How can I? The same as you, I suppose!" A reminiscence of soldiering came back to me. "It's been like waiting to go over the top. A horrible aching anxiety. No, something more than that. A sense of being trapped, of being surrounded—"

"Surrounded!" He caught up the word with a cry. "That's just what you are! That's just what we both are!"

I drew him away from the curtained window.

"Surrounded? By what?" I made myself ask.

He spread out his hands and shook them helplessly.

"The Powers of Darkness, Hatred, Bloodlust, Intolerance—they were all waiting, waiting for the signal. Do you think these things die like spent matches? Do you think the black act of treachery, which brought them into this house, left nothing behind it. *They*

were waiting—all these years—I tell you!” Suddenly he bared his teeth at me. “You fool, to have waved that rag at them!”

Just for a moment I felt my brain turning like a wheel, but I made a fight for my sanity and won it back.

“Look here,” I said, “for God’s sake don’t let’s behave like madmen. Let’s get out of it if the house is going to affect us like this.”

He stared back at me, giving me a look which I could not read.

“No,” he muttered; “you wanted to stay.”

“Let’s go down to the Wellingford Arms.”

“They’re closed now.”

“It doesn’t matter. They know you. They’ll open for you.”

I found myself lusting for the world beyond that unnatural girdle of darkness. The Wellingford Arms with its vulgar tin advertisements of Somebody’s Beer, and Somebody Else’s Whisky, and its framed Christmas Number plates—at least there was sanity there.

But Vair suddenly turned on me the eyes of a hunted animal.

“You fool!” he burst out. “It’s too late! We can’t pass through them!”

“What do you mean?” I faltered.

“They’re all around us. You know it, too. They’ll break in—in their own good time—as they did before. We’re trapped, I tell you!”

Against my will, and Heaven knows how hard I fought for disbelief, Vair had captured my powers of reason. In theory, if not in action, I was now prepared to follow him like a child.

“What do they want?” I stammered.

“Us! One of us or both! What did Murder and Hatred and Blood-lust ever want but sacrifice?”

He fairly spat the words at me and I seized his arm.

“Come on,” I said, “we’re going to get out of this. We’re going to run the gauntlet.”

“Ah,” said Vair thickly. “If we can.”

We must have crossed the hall, although I do not remember it. My next recollection is of helping Vair in his fumbling with the bolts and lock of the great door. We wrenched it open and stood looking out at an opaque wall of darkness.

I tried to force myself across the threshold, only to find myself standing rigid. As in a nightmare, my legs were shackled so that I could not move a step forward, but although terror clawed at me like a wild beast, my senses were keenly and even painfully alert.

I knew that this belt of darkness around the house was alive with whisperings and movements, with all manner of stealthiness,

which lurked only just beyond the horizon of vision and the limits of hearing. And as I stood straining eyes and ears I knew that the barriers must soon break and that I should see and hear.

We stood thus a long while on the edge of the threshold we could not pass, but whether it were seconds or minutes I could not say. To us it seemed hours ere the darkness passed, melting into the living forms of men. We could *see*, and there was movement everywhere; we could *hear*, and voices were shouting orders, although the actual words eluded us. They were human voices with strange nasal intonations, snarling and shouting. Even in my extremity I remembered having heard the soldiery of Cromwell had affected a hideous nasal accent. And now the darkness was sundered and shivered by a score of lights, the lights of naked torches which nodded to the rhythm of men marching. I saw the glint of them on the metal heads of pikes, and on the long barrels of muskets outlined clearly now against a naked sky of stars.

Terror may bind a man to the spot, but another turn of the rack may torture him back into motion. So it was with us. Blind instinct alone made me slam the great door and shoot the nearest heavy bolt. I saw Vair groping for me like a tear-blinded child and I took his arm. We ran futilely back into the room we had vacated and crouched in the corner farthest from the door, while great noises like thunder began to reverberate through the house, as pike handles and musket-butts crashed sickeningly on the great outer door.

We must have taken leave of reason then, for neither Vair nor I can remember anything more until the great nail-studded door, smashed off its hinges, fell onto the broken flags of the hall with the loudest crash of all. The tramp of feet mingled with the sound of arms carelessly handled, thudding against floor and wall, and with the sharp nasal snarling of voices. In a moment it seemed they were everywhere—in the hall, on the main staircase, in the room over our heads.

Vair had all this time the grip of a madman on my wrist, and suddenly he leaned to me and screamed into my ear:

"The Chapel . . . under the roof . . . it's consecrated . . . there's a chance . . . there's a chance, I tell you. . . ."

"They're on the stairs!" I cried back in despair.

"The back stairs! Come on!"

A second door in the old room gave access to a passage leading to the back stairs. Those stairs we knew to be unsafe, but ordinary human peril was something far beyond and beneath our consid-

eration. I remember the rumble and murmur of sounds about the house as we rushed out into the passage. Footfalls and voices sounded everywhere, and musket-butts were smiting heavily against walls and stairs. As we stumbled and ran I expected at every step to be seized and overwhelmed by some horrible and nameless Power.

How we reached the attic I cannot say. The narrow, crumbling staircase creaked and swayed under us, and once I went down thigh-deep through the rotten stairs, with splinters of hard wood tearing clothes and flesh. But we were near the top ere the hunt had scented their game and sounds of pursuit began to clamor behind us.

Vair forced open the door of the little room which had once been a chapel, I blundered in over his body, which lay prone just across the threshold. He had fallen unconscious, and I had to force his legs aside before I could close the door. I slammed it to in the faces of vague forms which filled the passage to the stair-head, and drove home the wooden bolt inside. And then it seemed to me that our pursuers recoiled from that closed door like a great wave from the base of a cliff, and ugly cries outside died down to uneasy whisperings—and instinctively I knew that we were safe.

I must have fainted then, for I remember nothing more until I woke in the bright sunshine. Vair was sitting beside me, watching me, with a chalk-like face. We hardly spoke, but sought each other's hands like frightened children.

Eventually we nerved ourselves to go downstairs into the ruin and disorder of the old house, through which, one might have thought, a whirlwind had passed during the night.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Jim Galsen

Those of you who have enjoyed John Lutz's stories as they've appeared in this magazine will want to know about a recent collection of his work. **Better Mousetraps** (St. Martin's, \$18.95, 347 pp.) features thirty-five tales by the Edgar-winning short story writer, plus an introduction and checklist by the editor, Francis M. Nevins, Jr. Fans should appreciate the fact that these stories—many published in AHMM and EQMM—have been compiled into a handy single hardcover volume. Anyone who enjoys an excellent short story should enjoy Lutz.

Silver Street, by E. Richard Johnson won the MWA Edgar when it was published. Now Johnson has reprised Tony Lonto, detective, in a gritty mean-streets mystery titled **Blind Man's Bluff** (St. Martin's, \$13.95, 168 pp.). It opens with the torture and death of a blind Vietnam vet, and ends several deaths later. Not a pretty tale of greed and violence with an old wartime crime at the heart.

Gaylord Larsen's **A Paramount Kill** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 211 pp.) gives us Raymond Chandler himself as the detective—a very amateur detective. The time is 1945, when Chandler's Philip Marlowe stories were selling well, and he'd been lured to Paramount Studios to write screenplays. A practical joke backfires, and Chandler sets about to investigate what looks like murder. Larsen has

made Chandler sympathetic, but the small man with the big drinking problem bore little resemblance to his famous fictional detective, and the murder story is a bit thin.

Isaac Asimov's **A Whiff of Death** has been reprinted (Fawcett, \$3.50, 222 pp.), and it's perfect for lovers of the classical suspense story. A brilliant, unlikable graduate student dies in his lab while performing an experiment. His advisor, Professor Lou Brade, believes Ralph was murdered, but fears that he himself will be suspected. So he sets out to investigate quietly on his own. As Brade digs into the affairs of his department, he makes some startling discoveries. A few of them are about himself.

Mrs. Pollifax, the delightful grandmother and peripatetic CIA agent, returns in **Mrs. Pollifax and the Golden Triangle** (Doubleday, \$15.95, 188 pp.). Emily and her new husband Cyrus Reed have planned a longed-for vacation to Thailand. The night before they are to depart Emily is visited by Bishop from the CIA, with a humble request that the couple make a simple, pre-arranged pickup. However, as Emily Pollifax has discovered in her seven previous adventures, nothing is ever that simple; and when Cyrus is kidnapped, she finds herself involved in one of her more deadly and important cases. Fans know what to expect here, and they shouldn't be disappointed.

The Latimer Mercy by Robert Richardson has many admirable elements: a cathedral town setting, a sophisticated amateur sleuth, a supporting cast of English village characters and clerics. It also has a psychopathic killer, one whose crime—murder and mutilation of a beautiful visiting actress, an intelligent and gifted woman at the peak of her powers—gives this novel a deadly gravity that many mysteries purposely avoid. Even with so many of the elements found in a traditional "cosy," *The Latimer Mercy* is definitely not one. It is a disturbing novel, well-written and emotionally wrenching. I hope we'll see more of playwright-sleuth Augustus Maltravers, and perhaps the next time both he and his readers will be able to lighten up. (Signet, \$3.50, 224 pp.)

Readers who appreciate women protagonists—not as victims—should warm to Kathryn Lasky Knight's **Trace Elements** (Pocket Books, \$3.50, 252 pp.). Tom Jacobs is alone in a desert archaeological camp when a rattlesnake bites him, and he quickly dies. Now his widow Calista, an illustrator of children's books and still very much in love with Tom, must go on, even if only for her teenage son Charley. There is lots going on here and it unravels slowly and in detail, until we finally see what Tom was

actually doing out there and how a number of people put self-interest first and muddled the truth—and one of them went so far as to murder to keep his secret. The background of academia and museum curatorship is fascinating, and richly detailed. Calista is smart, tough, and yet vulnerable, and she wears well in this story of her search for the truth surrounding her beloved Tom's death.

A delightfully droll heroine pops up in the person of Bonnie Indermille, heroine of Carol Berry's **Letter of the Law** (St. Martin's Press, \$15.95, 214 pp.). Bonnie is thirty-six, single, and office administrator at a down-in-the-mouth Manhattan law firm. When one of the senior partners is found dead in a sleazy hotel, Bonnie meets homicide detective Tony LaMarca. As the appointed police liaison among the office staff—and as a woman LaMarca finds attractive—Bonnie comes into possession of some of the more puzzling aspects of the case. Well, that's enough for Bonnie, former tap dancer and hippie street musician, the penultimate no-nonsense New Yorker, who's also cursed with a real cat-killing curiosity. An interesting plot, a bombshell ending, and a mild romance all add to the fun here. But it is Bonnie herself, narrating her tale in a breezy, irresistible voice, who makes *Letter of the Law* one of the gems of the season.

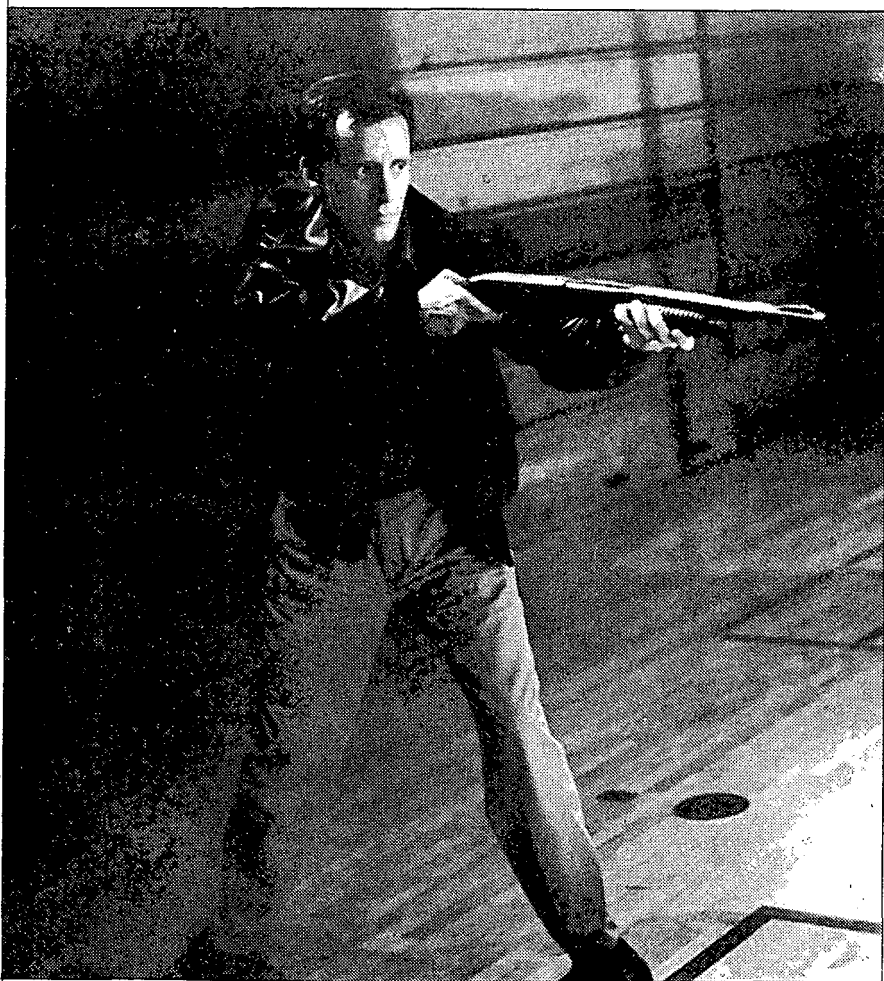
A Lover Scorned is Isabelle Holland's third mystery set in St. Anselm's, the stylish uptown Manhattan Episcopal parish where Claire Aldington, assistant rector, works. The novel opens with the brutal stabbing of a pretty female rector from another parish, and the request from Claire's old buddy on the police force that she try to find out something of the dead woman's private life. All well and good—until Claire's investigation turns up a relationship between the victim and Claire's fiancé. Then the anonymous phone calls to Claire begin, and it looks as if more than her love life is being threatened. Adult situations, language, and characters make these clerical mysteries attractive to those who like their novels serious and un-cosy. (Fawcett, \$2.95, 248 pp.)

Fans of Edmund Crispin and his ilk—"wacky" is the best word I can come up with to describe Crispin—should appreciate the jaded humor of Michael Kenyon in **A Healthy Way to Die** (Avon, \$2.95, 184 pp.). The setting is a very new and very posh health spa in England; the plot centers around illegal money laundering—or does it, actually? It's up to the very unconventional Scotland Yard Detective Inspector Henry Peckover, ably assisted by the irrepressible local constable—to find out who is killing the guests.

Shattered Silk is a term used by dealers of vintage clothing to describe delicate silk that has been ravaged by time and other conditions until it shreds in a manner that makes it look slashed. It is also the title of Barbara Michaels' recent romantic suspense, now out in paperback (Berkley, \$3.95, 307 pp.). Karen Nevitt is house-sitting the beautiful Georgetown home of her aunt and uncle, a perfect refuge for a woman being divorced after ten years of an almost servile marriage. The generosity of a wealthy old woman inspires Karen to begin planning a new career: opening a small shop specializing in vintage clothing. Her new-found friend and partner, the initial success of her business, even the romantic interest shown by a handsome cop—none of it dispels the ominous sense of gloom as small incidents of violence escalate. This is classic romantic suspense: a touching heroine, her staunch buddy, a stormy but romantic liaison, and a deadly threat, all set against a background of wealth with a hint of glamor.

Lieutenant Sigrid Harald—one of NYPD's finest if not friendliest cops—should be recovering from a knife wound. Instead, she's in charge of the investigation into a bombing at a fancy hotel during an amateur cribbage tournament. Two people are dead, and two are injured, including Sigrid's partner. So begins the search for **The Right Jack** (a cribbage term): in other words, who was the true intended victim? Sigrid Harald joins the ranks of other female policewomen and P.I.'s. She's smart, efficient, and sympathetic, though critical colleagues claim she's too controlled. Author Margaret Maron explores Sigrid's feelings over the tragic deaths, the grief of the survivors, and the relief of the partner's wife—all made more poignant by the female officer's refusal to show much emotion at all. (Bantam, \$3.50, 205 pp.)

P.M. Carlson's youthful sleuth, Maggie Ryan, wins more fans with each new book. The latest, a Bantam paperback original (\$3.50, 217 pp.), is **Murder Unrenovated**, and it's a charmer. Maggie and her actor-husband Nick O'Connor think they've found the perfect Brooklyn brownstone to buy and fix up before the baby comes. The realtor is thrilled that they aren't put off by the stubborn bag lady who lives in the garden apartment; but even an optimistic realtor doesn't expect them to ignore the body they find in the empty upstairs apartment. The old Mrs. Northrup character is a gem, and Maggie and Nick are endearing, as usual. Any fan of Charlotte MacLeod's Sarah Kelling would probably do well to pick up P.M. Carlson's books.

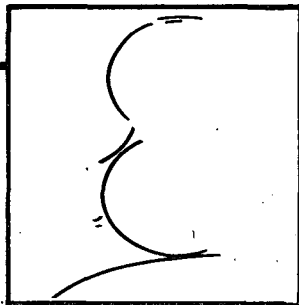


© 1987 Atlantic Entertainment Group

James Woods as Detective Lloyd Hopkins confronts the serial killer he has been stalking in the gym of the high school they both attended.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Far more intriguing than its blunt title would suggest, **Cop** follows a Los Angeles homicide detective's hunch, based on a fragment of poetry left at a murder scene, that a serial killer is on the loose. James Woods, who played the demented cop killer in *The Onion Field*, is Detective Lloyd Hopkins, a man who likes to work the tough cases. This time, as one lead after another peters out, he realizes that he's after someone without a record who has never been fingerprinted and probably doesn't even have any parking violations.

The police higher-ups are skeptical when Hopkins tries to escalate the case into a mass search for a serial killer, and for once we were sympathetic to their intransigence—

inasmuch as our confidence in the detective derived strictly from experience with other mystery movies. All Hopkins really has to go on are too many unsolved deaths of young women vaguely resembling the one just killed. But then he notices that two of the women died on June tenth in successive years and that a certain police officer, Haines, was the first on the scene in both cases.

Haines does prove to figure in the case, but only much later do we realize that the clue Hopkins was really working with was a certain quality of innocence shared by the victims. As both a cop who sees what can happen to young women alone in the city and the father of a nine- or ten-year-old daughter, he has become obsessed with

the vulnerable innocence of young women. In fact, when he tries to prepare his daughter for life by telling her lurid police stories, his wife concludes that he is mentally disturbed and moves out with the child.

As it turns out, the serial killer shares Hopkins' obsession with female innocence, except that he feels compelled to destroy where Hopkins would protect. The emergence of a psychological affinity between detective and killer may be formulaic, as we have sometimes observed in this column, but it usually works. That is why we were surprised when *Cop*, unlike the novel on which the movie is based—*Blood on the Moon* by James Ellroy—only hinted at such an affinity. (Ellroy, who has been compared to both Raymond Chandler and Joseph Wambaugh, was a nominee for an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America for his novel, *Clandestine*.)

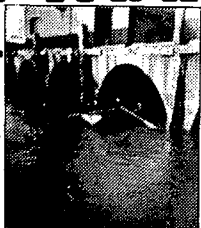
By failing to follow the novel's depiction of the killer as Hopkins' "evil symbiotic twin," the movie turns the novel's neat web of relationships into glaring coincidences—not only between Hopkins and the killer but also involving a feminist bookstore owner who may become the next victim. All of them went to the same local high school, and the killer's

motive is traceable to an incident of violence to which two of them were connected. Such coincidence is permissible in mysteries, but it has to be carefully prepared for. The novel starts with the high school incident and establishes the affinity between Hopkins and the killer early on. But the movie does nothing to dispel our skepticism.

James Woods, who always trails a hint of the maniacal after him in his roles, would have been an ideal actor to portray a detective psychologically linked with his prey. Leslie Ann Warren's portrayal of the feminist is emotionally if not logically convincing: her odd mixture of anger and sentimentality is attributed to her having been raped by high school classmates. But in the novel the rape is something entirely different—a homosexual assault involving the boy who would become the serial killer. The moviemakers were presumably reluctant to take on author James Ellroy's controversial handling of both homosexuality and feminism at the same time. But they found little to replace these with and so produced a promising but disappointing thriller.

Cop is better than its title would suggest, but not by that much.

THE STORY THAT WON



The January Mysterious Photo-
cia Beene of Henderson, Texas.
Asher of New York, New York;
Myers, Florida; Jan Streilein of
Cosling of Arlington, Virginia;
Pennsylvania; William L. Burr
ald Hardy of Vancouver, B.C.,
kane, Washington; Chas. McArthur of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Tom Bloor of
Shelbyville, Illinois; Avonelle Kelsey of Carlsbad, California; and James Loverde of
Chicago, Illinois.

graph contest was won by Patri-
Honorable mentions go to C. A.
Charles R. Henderson of Fort
Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Art
Peter M. Winkler of Franklin,
of Yorba Linda, California; Don-
Canada; Dorothy Lewis of Spo-
Canada; Dorothy Lewis of Spo-

TUNNEL VISION by Patricia Beene

"I hate water, I don't know why I let you talk me into this."
Inspector Breedlove gripped the sides of the rowboat with white
knuckles.

"Because we need proof, sir," answered Sergeant MacTavish.

"What makes you think we'll find it in this culvert?" Breedlove
asked.

MacTavish tugged on the oars in an effort to control his patience.
Sometimes his superior could be so dense. "This culvert runs along-
side Ben Scoggin's house. Witnesses say he robbed the liquor store.
It stands to reason the loot is hidden somewhere in the vicinity of
his house."

"I still don't understand the water-sports," muttered Breedlove,
his eyes tightly closed. He was torn between holding on to the boat
or putting his hands over his ears to block out the slap-slap of
water against the tunnel sides.

MacTavish paused, oars at rest, and spoke with as much toler-
ance as he could muster. "We've searched the house and outbuild-
ings with no luck. His boat showed evidence of use on the night
the liquor store was robbed; therefore I suspect it was used to carry
the booze to a safe hiding place . . ."

Inspector Breedlove opened his eyes. "Brilliant, MacTavish! You
are to be complimented on your excellent detective work," he pro-
claimed.

"Er . . . you mean you agree with me?" MacTavish lost an oar
in his surprise.

"I most certainly do." Breedlove stared over MacTavish's shoul-
der. "And besides . . ."

"Yes, sir?" MacTavish said eagerly.

Inspector Breedlove pointed. "I can see the Light at the end of
the tunnel!"

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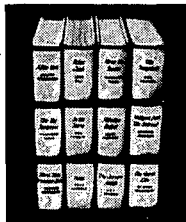
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